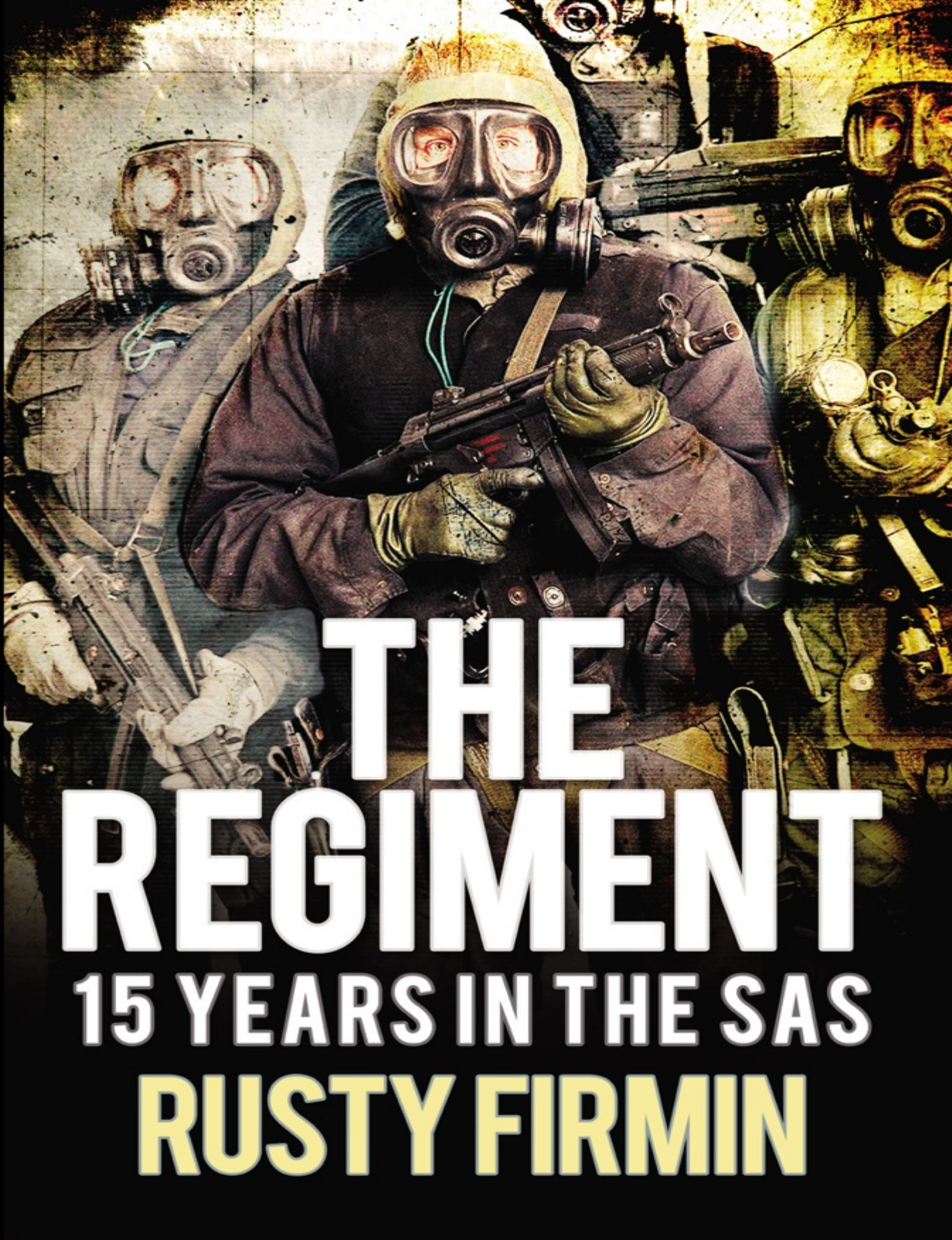
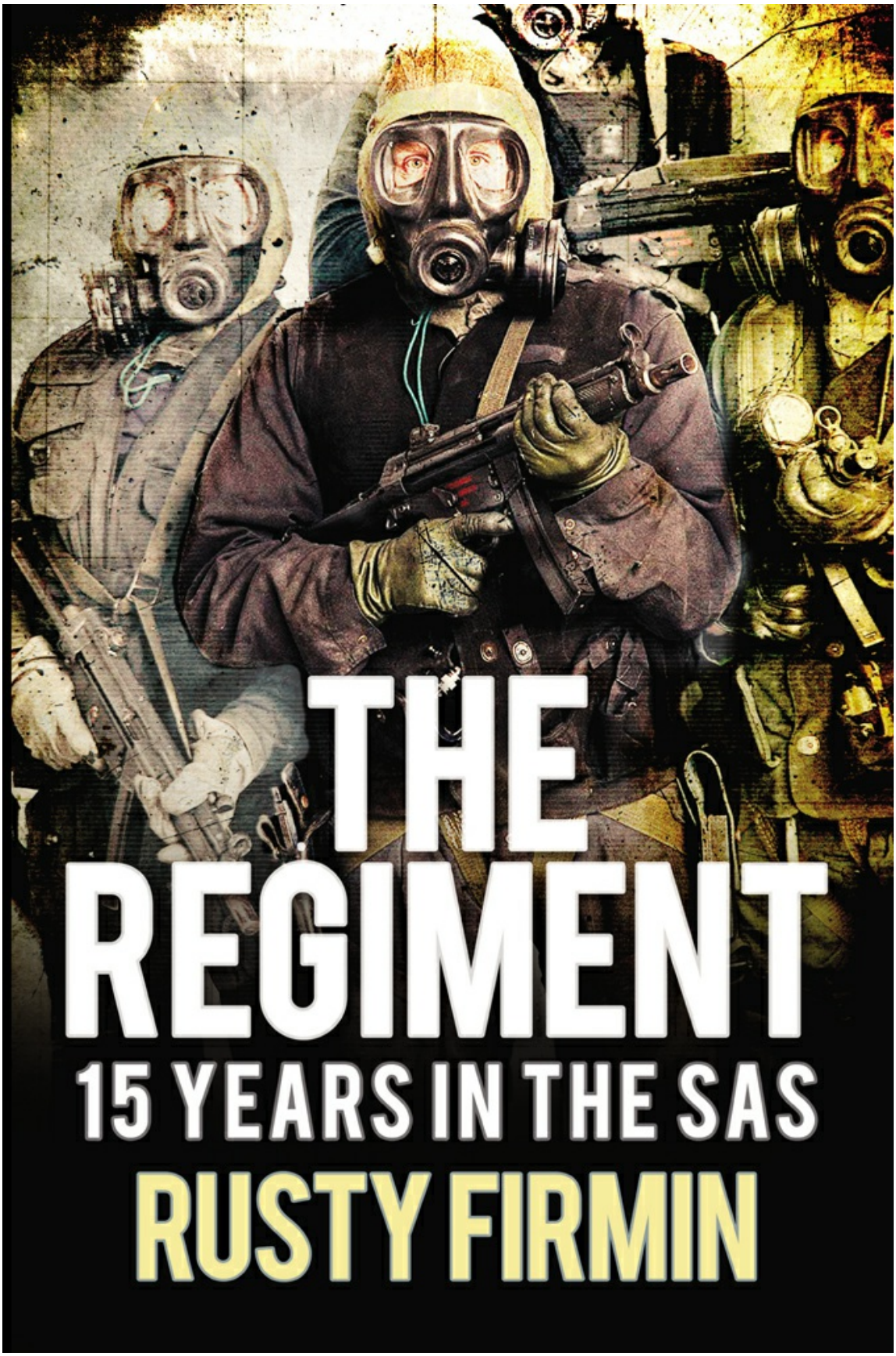


THE REGIMENT

15 YEARS IN THE SAS

RUSTY FIRMIN


THE
REGIMENT
15 YEARS IN THE SAS
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15 YEARS IN THE SAS

RUSTY FIRMIN

OSPREY
PUBLISHING

This book is dedicated to my lovely wife Torky, who helped to push me on and motivate me during all those times when I was feeling down and depressed: without her support, I doubt the book would ever have been finished. Also for my sons, Mark and Matthew, who have always stood by me and for whom I have nothing but love and admiration: and when they read this, they'll know what their dad was doing all those years!

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I also want to thank the Pilgrim Bandits Charity (www.pilgrimbandits.org) for their support. To some extent it is my work as a patron and ambassador for this fantastic organisation that got me thinking about writing this story. I was lucky: I was never seriously injured during my military service but many more haven't been so fortunate. The Pilgrim Bandits supports and challenges some of the most severely injured service personnel from Iraq and Afghanistan, and they have done a marvellous job: I have nothing but admiration for them. Always a little further…

Finally, I served for 27 years in the British Army and I want to thank all of the friends and colleagues who helped to make that a – mostly – hugely enjoyable and worthwhile experience. Many are still with us and some have sadly passed away but we were a team and we all played our part. Who Dares Wins!

Rusty Firmin

INTRODUCTION

It was the end of June 1991 and a big party was being held at the Paludrin Club, the all-ranks bar at Stirling Lines, Hereford, the headquarters of 22 SAS Regiment. And lucky me, I had an invite.

It was a special day. The Gulf War had finished three months before and the story was that the 'Operational Awards' list was about to be published and that some members of A, B and D Squadrons were going to be on it. The Regiment were planning to celebrate.

I was invited even though I hadn't been in the Gulf – not for want of trying, I might add – and despite the fact that I wasn't, technically at least, a member of 22 SAS any more. By then, I was a permanent staff instructor with 23 SAS, one of the Territorial Army (TA) SAS regiments, 60-odd miles up the road in Birmingham, and I'd been there a year. But I'd joined 22 SAS back in 1977, I was still in uniform and I was still SAS, so someone put my name on the list and there I was.

As the beer started to flow, I sought out two very old friends. John McAleese I'd first met when we were doing the 'beat-up' for the Commando Course at the Plymouth Citadel in 1974. We'd both finished that, passed the Commando Course and won our green berets together, and had a lot of fun in the process. Pete Morrison, always known as 'the Mink', was on SAS selection with me in 1977 (as was John Mac, although he injured his ankle and couldn't finish the course first time round).

Somehow or other, we had all finished up in 8 Troop, B Squadron, 22 SAS and had been soldiering together, through good times and bad, ever since. The SAS is a close-knit regiment and over that time we'd got to know each other better than we knew our own families. We'd stormed the Iranian Embassy, we'd parachuted into the South Atlantic and we'd spent innumerable days and nights hiding in hedgerows and roof-spaces in Northern Ireland together, and even though we all lived in the same town, it was good to have the opportunity to get a few refreshing beers down our necks in a safe and secure environment, where we didn't have to worry too much about who could overhear us as we told our war stories to each other.

Eventually, the time came for the big reveal and the commanding officer stood up to announce who had been honoured for their part in the fighting in Iraq and Kuwait. As the list was read out, you could have heard a pin drop. The Regiment had received an astonishing array of gallantry awards. There was a Distinguished Service Order, three Distinguished Conduct Medals, six Military Medals and 19 Mentions in Despatches. I knew from serving in the Regiment that it was composed of brave men, but this total comprised nearly a quarter of the guys who'd actually got out on the ground.

As I said, I hadn't been able to get out to the Gulf and neither had John. The Mink had, but we were all surprised. From the stories we'd heard, things hadn't actually gone that well. One eight-man patrol from B Squadron had fucked up so badly that three of its members had died – including a well-respected friend of ours, Vince Phillips – four had been captured and only one had managed to evade to safety after an incredible 200-mile walk across the desert. Yet now we learned that the patrol commander, a B Squadron sergeant, had been awarded the second highest honour a non-commissioned officer (NCO) could receive for bravery. As the party continued the mood began to change. Instead of the atmosphere of congratulation that you would expect under these circumstances, it began to degenerate into accusation, denunciation and anger. A rumour was going round that some of those who had been honoured had actually been considered for disciplinary action. A Squadron were making accusations against B Squadron and vice versa, D Squadron were digging into A and B. Before the night was over, punches had been thrown and blood spilled.

You could argue that that party set off a chain of events. British Forces in the Gulf had been commanded by General Sir Peter de la Billière, known to all as DLB, an officer whose career was completely entwined with the SAS. He'd been a troop commander in the 1950s, a squadron commander in the 1960s, Commanding Officer 22 SAS in the 1970s and Director SAS at the beginning of the 1980s. If there was such a thing, he was the public face of the SAS and throughout the latter stages of his involvement, he had been discreetly organising publicity for the Regiment, primarily through books written by friends and acquaintances, as well as developing close links at the highest levels of government.

A little over a year later after that night, after DLB had left the army, he published a book about his time in the Gulf. Although the Regiment had only played a small role in the conflict, DLB knew his market and the guys'

exploits were plastered all across it. Once again, the SAS was front page news. DLB's problem – supposedly – was that he'd lost a lot of money as a 'name' in the Lloyd's insurance market and he needed to make it back quickly. The rumour went around that he'd been allowed to interview members of the Regiment with a view to putting their stories in his book. This developed into a conspiracy theory that some of the gallantry awards had been inflated to make his book more saleable. Personally I thought that credited him with a lot more foresight than he actually had.

But what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. Some of the soldiers whose stories DLB had told at second hand were out of the army by now, and why shouldn't they tell the world what had happened? DLB's second-hand glory was outshone by their first-hand accounts and suddenly the SAS was a publishing phenomenon, with ex-SAS soldiers falling over themselves to tell varying degrees of tall tales about their exploits.

This caused different reactions in the army and the Regiment. Some took the view that SAS soldiers should be not seen and not heard and pushed through a ban on serving members being allowed to write their memoirs, either now or in the future. Others, more realistically, thought that if people did publish stuff about their time in the SAS, they should at least tell the truth.

By then I honestly couldn't give a stuff. I left the SAS in 1992 and started on a busy career as a VIP protection specialist all round the world and although I gave some interviews about the SAS for a TV series in the mid-1990s, I was far too busy to think about writing about my time in the Regiment. I had a whole new life to get on with.

But time passes. As the 30th anniversary of the Iranian Embassy Siege approached, I thought it was about time that somebody who'd been closely involved should tell the full story. As I'd actually shot the second-in-command of the terrorist group, I reckoned that I qualified for that. And with that under my belt, why not tell the story of my journey through the army and SAS? It's more than 22 years since I left the Regiment and none of the people I served with are still in the SAS so it couldn't do any harm to dispel a few myths and tell a few hard truths.

So here it is. I wasn't a secret agent or a superman; I was a soldier, and a fucking good one. So were most of the guys I served with. This is my story and a little of theirs too, and I hope you enjoy it.

CHAPTER ONE
CHILDHOOD

Like a lot of the people I wound up serving with, I joined the army more or less by accident. It certainly wasn't anything I'd intended to do with my life; in fact, if I'd thought about it, which I didn't very much when I was young, I suppose I might have wanted to be a professional footballer, although I hadn't made any moves in that direction either. In fact, when I eventually found myself sitting, crying, on a train heading towards the Junior Leaders' Regiment Royal Artillery at Bramcote in Warwickshire as a 15-year-old, I'd been drifting pretty much aimlessly through life.

I was born on 4 February 1950 in Carlisle. I don't have any memories of my real mum and dad but I must have done something to piss them off because they put me up for adoption and, 14 months after I was born, the Carlisle City Juvenile Court of Summary Jurisdiction handed me over to John Arthur Russell Firmin and his wife Nancy Chapman Firmin of 2 Hewson Street, Carlisle, Cumberland. They named me Walter Harold Russell Firmin. I think I have a memory from this time of waking up in bed with my new mum and realising something had changed, but that may just be wishful thinking, and in fact I didn't find out that I was adopted until many years later.

My memories of early childhood are episodic. The house we lived in was a typical small council house, close to the Carlisle Swimming Baths. I remember it had a big open coal fire on which we used to toast bread and that at this time Mum was a housewife, looking after me while Dad was at work. He was a soldier, a sergeant in the Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC)* based at a big supply depot just outside the city. He hadn't always been a 'blanket stacker' but he'd lost an eye fighting at Anzio during World War II, so that's where he ended up.

* Now part of the Royal Logistic Corps.

When I was about three, Dad got posted overseas and we went with him to

Klagenfurt in Austria, which at that time was still being occupied by British, American, Russian and French garrisons. I have a vague memory of taking the car ferry to the Hook of Holland and the long drive down through the Netherlands and Germany but not much more. Dad was working at a British Army repair and supply depot and I was old enough by then to go to a local kindergarten where I learned a bit of basic German: enough to be able to play with the other kids and to order food and drinks when we went out to cafés and restaurants.

We were in Austria for two years, or thereabouts, but perhaps the biggest event came right at the end of Dad's tour of duty when my parents adopted my real half-sister, Hazel, who is four years younger than I am. To coincide with her arrival, we moved on to what would be Dad's final posting with the army at a supply depot in Catterick in North Yorkshire.

In Catterick, we lived in a small end-of-terrace house on one of the army married quarter estates. The first Christmas we were there I remember waking up to find a pillowcase full of presents on the end of my bed. As I dug through it the last present I came to was a proper, leather, laced-up Casey football. For some reason, this seemed to me to be the best present of all and I took it everywhere.

On the army estate I began to make friends and began to get into training as a juvenile delinquent. There was a railway line running through the garrison which was used to bring supplies and equipment to the ordnance depot and, for some reason, this was like a magnet to me. When I went out to play, I would always go to the railway line and fool around there, much to my parents' concern. Back in those days, people didn't worry that their kids were going to be abducted and murdered by child molesters, but getting run over by a train was a distinct possibility. I'd be outside, kicking my ball about or playing on the railway line until all hours, and with Hazel now on the scene, Mum could only keep half an eye open for me. Instead, when Dad got home he'd yell out for me – he had an incredibly loud voice – and I'd pick up my football and scurry back for tea.

Catterick was where I started real school for the first time and it soon became clear that I wasn't going to be an academic superstar. I hated the place, didn't want to do any work and, being small for my age and a bit of a loner, I didn't get on with most of the other kids. It didn't matter to me then; as long as I wasn't in school, I was happy and that was that.

A strong memory of that period is of sitting outside our house in the

pouring rain, watching a thunderstorm passing over. It all seemed a lot of fun until, with a deafening crack, lightning struck the drainpipe which ran down the side of the house, a few yards from where I was standing. The noise, the smell of burning and the sheer shock were enough to get me bawling my eyes out and I ran indoors, where I was comforted with a slapped arse for being stupid enough to stay out in the rain. Any time I heard thunder after that, I was straight indoors.

When I was six, Dad finally left the army and we moved back to Carlisle to settle down. We had a council house in Longsowerby and I was sent to a primary school in Denton Holme. This was a happy time for me. My mum, Nancy, was a lovely, kind woman and Dad was around much more now as well, now that he was back in civvy street. I began to make a few friends locally too, and although I was still rubbish at school, life was good.

My best mate then, and for a long while after, was George Creighton who lived on the same street and we played together all the time when I wasn't in school. Apart from football, the other thing I really liked then was playing with guns. I had a cowboy outfit and a gun which fired caps, but even better was my dad's Webley air-pistol which I could sneak out of his cupboard when he was at work. This was the type that had a big air chamber with a spring-loaded piston that you cocked by levering up the barrel when you loaded it. I was too young to buy proper pellets but found out that it would just as easily shoot small balls of rolled-up tin foil. As an experiment, I shot my four-year-old sister in the leg with one of these and – oops! – it certainly did work. There was blood everywhere and when Dad got home from work, I got a thorough hiding from him.

The occasional spanking didn't seem to do anything to deter me though. Another game that George and I came up with involved my dad's old steel helmet. The idea was that one of us would put the helmet on and stand in the back garden, while the other would throw three darts in the air; the idea being that the darts would bounce off the helmet. This worked for several turns but, inevitably, I wound up with two of the darts sticking out of my knee and any sympathy my parents felt for me was tempered by their anger at me for being so stupid: time for another spanking.

One of the best times of year for me was in the lead-up to Bonfire Night on 5 November. Back then you could buy 240 penny bangers for a pound and that's just what we did. Throughout late October and the first few days of November, we'd all be sneaking around the estate, our pockets bulging with

fireworks which we'd light and then drop into the empty milk bottles that people left on their doorsteps for the milkman to collect. The explosions would blow these apart and we'd run off, screaming with laughter. It's fair to say that without being criminal or violent, I was a bit of a nuisance.

Same with the football. I took my leather football everywhere with me but our stadium, if you like, was an area of garages down the end of our road. I'd spend hours down there with my mates, using one of the garage doors as a goal and the big, heavy ball would be thumping against them with monotonous regularity. It must have driven the neighbours mad. Every now and then, one of them would come to our house and ring on the doorbell to complain. Dad would nod his head and ground me for a day or two but he never seriously tried to stop me, not least because I was a sulky pain in the backside if I had to hang around the house too long.

I started to notice around this time that if any trouble went down, I was usually the one that copped the beating for it, whoever else was involved. It was probably because my red hair made me readily identifiable. To be honest it didn't bother me: the occasional slap on the arse or slippering was more than made up for by the fun I had. I was young and full of energy and high spirits; and it all seemed worth it. I wasn't being beaten up or abused: that's just how we rolled in those days.

Having said that, one incident does stick in my memory. A group of us went round to play with a girl from the next street while her parents were out and someone had the good idea to paint one of their rooms. Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time, so we all got stuck in. The mess was indescribable but none of us was bothered until we heard her parents coming home. At this point we bomb-burst out of the house before they could catch us. Of course, I was the one they recognised and her dad was straight round to complain. By the time I heard my dad shouting for me, I was cleverly hiding under my bed but he came upstairs and hauled me out. Whatever excuse I came up with was neutralised by the fact that I was still completely covered in paint. He must have bloody near worn out his slipper on my backside that afternoon and I was still crying when he took me round to apologise, snuffling and snotty, with the tears rolling down my cheeks.

Around the age of ten I became dimly aware that there were problems at home. I think my dad had found it difficult to get a proper job after leaving the army and he was often away on short-term contracts doing what we'd now call logistics. Mum was spending increasingly long stretches in bed, and

although I realised she wasn't well I had no idea what the problem was. In fact she had cancer.

Meanwhile, I was heading towards the all-important 11-plus exam which would determine whether I got to go to a grammar school or whether I'd be flushed down the crapper with all the other kids who got sent to a 'secondary modern'. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that I was going to fail and had taken to bunking off school on a regular basis on the grounds that there wasn't much point in showing up. Instead I was just farting around, taking advantage of the parental vacuum.

One day, not long before my 11th birthday, I went to sit by Mum's bedside and chat to her. She told me she was dying and that she loved me; she said that she would really like me to become a doctor so that I could help people like her in the future. I sat there crying, feeling completely and utterly helpless. Guilty too, knowing there was no possible way I would ever make it as a doctor. She died without ever having mentioned to me that I was adopted and she'd loved me and Hazel as much as she could have loved any 'natural' son or daughter.

So, without wanting to sound too self-pitying, that seemed to be me pretty much fucked. With Mum gone, there was Dad who was in and out of work and often away from home; me, already a troublemaker and apparently turning into a genuine problem child; and my six-year-old sister who needed looking after.

It was a sad time for everyone and, in the way of things, the family rallied round to support us. My Auntie Jo came over from America with her daughter June to look after us kids but it certainly didn't change anything for me. I failed my 11-plus spectacularly and wound up going to the local secondary modern in Denton Holme.

About this time, George was given an air-rifle and this became a big focus for us. I'd swipe Dad's air-pistol and we would spend hours crawling through the undergrowth in the 'Top Field', as it was called locally, stalking cats, dogs, pigeons and anything else we could shoot at. With Mum gone and Dad away, I'd stay out late into the night, going home when I felt like it.

One positive thing about this period was that there was organised sport at my new school. I was only five feet tall and weighed about six and a half stone dripping wet but I was good enough at football to get a place in the school team for my age. We got to wear a proper football strip – blue and white, the same as the old Blackburn Rovers colours – and we had to take it

home to wash it after matches. I never wanted to return mine because I was worried someone else would get to wear it.

As I'd got a little older, the big focus for 5 November became the bonfire itself, rather than fooling around with fireworks. In each street on the estate, the local kids would build a bonfire, determined that theirs was going to be the best in the neighbourhood. The downside of this was that the rival gangs of kids would be sniffing around to see whether they could set your bonfire off before Guy Fawkes' Night, so each one would be zealously guarded. One evening, George and I, together with a couple of others, were guarding ours when a gang from a neighbouring street turned up to raid it. George and I opened fire with the air-guns, shooting three of them before they all ran off crying, and we managed to save it.

Auntie Jo and June had been living with us for about a year when things began to go drastically wrong. Sunday evening was the weekly bath night at home, whether you needed one or not, but it began to get a bit weird. After Hazel and I had had our baths, and while Auntie Jo was having hers, June would come into my room and fondle my private parts and kiss me on the mouth. She was 15 and I was 11, going on 12, and I didn't really comprehend what was happening. I wouldn't have understood the term sexual abuse back then but I certainly knew it was wrong. My confusion was compounded by the fact that the next day she would behave as if nothing at all had happened.

I didn't tell anyone about this abuse and before long Hazel and I were told that we would be moving to stay with another aunt at Brampton, a small country town about ten miles east of Carlisle. Dad was really struggling to find work at this time, and even did a stint as a redcoat at a Butlin's Holiday Camp. We saw very little of him.

Brampton was a whole different kettle of fish. Hazel got on well with my auntie but she was quite a strict person and that didn't suit me at all. Moving away from my mates in Carlisle to a new school had upset me and I cried a lot in the first few weeks. There was nobody to play football with and when the snow came that winter I would disappear out into the country with my sledge, playing alone for hours on end. I sort of struck up a friendship with a girl named Angela, from a village called Hallbankgate, who seemed to understand what I had been through but we could only ever see each other at school. The bottom line was that I was bored and miserable.

Light relief came in the form of occasional trips to Northallerton, in North Yorkshire, to stay with another aunt called Heather. She was nice enough but

for some reason her kids decided that I was the ideal subject for their game of ‘doctors and nurses’ and this turned into a painful and embarrassing probing of my private parts. I still wasn’t sure what this was all about but I still knew it was wrong. Back in Brampton, I asked my aunt about it and she said it was just a game and I shouldn’t talk about it, but I was never sent back to stay with Auntie Heather again.

It seems odd in retrospect that I should have been sexually abused by two separate sets of cousins and I wonder now why it happened. Physically I was small for my age but I suspect that it was more to do with the fact that having lost my mum, and with my dad being away so much, they could sense that I was vulnerable, innocent and trusting. It didn’t happen again.

We stayed in Brampton for less than a year before we were told that we would be moving back to Carlisle, this time to live with my grandma and granddad. This really cheered me up. We would be back in Harraby, where all my friends lived, and I would be attending Harraby Secondary Modern School, ten minutes’ walk from my grandparents’ house, which was the school that George Creighton and various other mates went to. Perfect: back to all my old mischief!

I couldn’t have been more wrong. After several years of doing whatever I wanted, my grandparents turned out to be the strictest of the strict. Mealtimes were fixed, and if I was late, I didn’t get to eat; and every Friday it was fish and chips, whether you liked it or not. Even worse, I was restricted to playing outside the house within earshot of Granddad in case he should call me in. My mates all had far more freedom than I did, and I was really jealous and resentful. It was made worse by the fact that I rarely saw Dad at all. He would come by every now and again to visit, but he didn’t stay long and I had a feeling of being cast adrift, without an anchor to hold me in place.

All I wanted to do at this time was play sport. In the winter we spent all our spare time on the school field playing football, and in the summer it was cricket. I was desperate to get into the school football team but as a 13-year-old I was still only five foot two and weighed not much more than seven stone, even though I was a pretty decent footballer. One of the boys at school was George McVitie, a towering six-footer who played for England Schoolboys, so what chance did I have?

But as it turned out, things did change for the better. Some time after my 13th birthday, Hazel and I were told that we would be going to stay with another aunt, Betty, and her husband Andy, who also lived in Harraby. This

turned out to be the happiest time of my childhood after the death of my mother.

Betty and Andy had two children living with them, Brian and Julie, and another son John who would eventually join the Scots Guards, and we all lived happily together in their three-bedroomed, terraced council house. Andy was a real human dynamo: he never owned a car but would cycle the ten miles to and from work every day, and every weekend he used to turn out for the works' football team. In fact, he used to take me along as well and I would bring my boots and a couple of paperback books that I used to use as shin-pads in case one of the team was injured or didn't turn up. As a result, I soon found myself playing in every position for them, including goalkeeper.

Occasionally, Brian, George Creighton and I would cycle the 20 miles up to the Solway Firth to go birds'-nesting. It's illegal now but was a big thing back then: you found a nest, took an egg from it, blew out the yolk and added it to your collection. Oddly enough, this hobby was what secured my one brush with fame as a teenager, and actually a brush with death too. One Sunday when Brian couldn't go, George and I cycled to the Solway Firth together and, having hidden our bikes, set out into the marshes on the hunt. Usually, we used a big red barn as a reference point to get back to but on this day, the sea mist rolled in thick and fast and, very quickly, we had absolutely no idea where we were. We set off in what we thought was the right direction but soon found that we were walking over the mud flats where the tide had gone out. It was getting late by now and soon the sea-water was up to our knees and rising. *Shit!*

We started shouting for help and, every now and again, we saw a light which we tried to head towards. It was beginning to get dark and we were starting to get very, very frightened. Before long, the water was around our chests and we knew enough about the tides in the firth to know that if it got much deeper, the currents were going to pick us up and carry us away. *Double shit!*

By now it was twilight. We were both shouting as loudly as we could when, out of the blue, a small rowing boat with two blokes in it came straight towards us and pulled us out of the water. They took us back to the shore as the tide continued to sweep in. We might have had 20 or 30 minutes before the tide picked us up and swept us to our deaths; instead we got back to safety and our story made the national daily papers. Quite a contrast.

It was while living with Andy and Betty that I got my first job, delivering

newspapers around the Harraby Estate. I would be up and waiting at the newsagent's before 5am, waiting for it to open, then get my round done before I arrived at school. After a spell of doing this, I even got a promotion: I became the boy who wrote the addresses on the papers for the other paperboys and I stuck with doing this for a couple of years. I found myself getting so hungry doing this that, when I had finished, I would buy a small box of cornflakes to take home and I would normally have scoffed the lot before anyone else in the house was even out of bed.

The great thing about Andy and Betty's house was that it was a loving, happy place and there was always something interesting going on. Betty would help us all get ready for school. Sometimes she would say, 'Your hair's sticking up,' and she would slick it down with margarine: I hated it but we didn't have hair gel back then.

Dad was still travelling about a lot for work, so we didn't see a lot of him, but he paid Andy and Betty for our keep and made sure that we were OK. Betty was a demon for bingo and when she won, you could be sure that she would come back laden with fish and chips for all of us. When it wasn't going so well, she would send me off on my bicycle to deliver a note to a friend who lived around the corner, asking for a loan which she would repay when Andy got his wages at the end of the month. When I was a little older, I took a look at one of these notes and saw that she had told her friend that she needed money because Dad hadn't paid her that month. I knew he had and that actually she'd blown the cash on bingo, which annoyed me a bit. Force of circumstances meant that Hazel and I weren't close to Dad but I knew he'd grown up in a family of nine children and he knew he had to pay his way, even when times were tough.

It was while Hazel and I were living with Andy and Betty that Dad met a widow called Dorothy who lived with her son Joe in a house about ten minutes' walk from where we were living. They hit it off big time and soon became an item, and it was all change once again. By then, with less than two years before I was due to leave school, I was getting into the whole music scene of the 'swinging sixties': I was growing my hair long; I was wearing skin-tight powder-blue jeans and Cuban heeled boots; and I was a big-time Rolling Stones fan. At school I was in trouble as much as I was out of it and, in comparison to Dorothy's goody-goody son Joe, I was a monster. I had an idea that I wanted to be a famous footballer but as I still couldn't get into the Harraby Secondary Modern school team that probably seemed a little

unrealistic to anyone other than me. Beyond that, I had no idea what I was going to do with my life.

In my last year at school someone – I no longer remember who – had the good idea of putting me in for the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme. Academically, I was clearly going nowhere but this sowed the seeds of a change in my whole life. It was based on outdoor activities, which I loved and which were generally good fun, but it also gave me a chance to build up my self-esteem and develop a sense of achievement I'd never had before, and to get the award, I needed to be able to show some leadership and a sense of discipline in a rigorous and challenging environment. I wasn't a complete loser – I knew, for example, that I was good at sport – but as a teenager I hadn't had parents there for me to guide me, advise me or push me on and it got me thinking just a little bit more about where I wanted to go in life. Though not enough, at this stage, to come up with any answers.

In the meantime, I was back in my old habits. Undeterred by our near death experience in the Solway Firth, George and I set off one weekend birds'-nesting in the countryside east of Carlisle, looking for sparrow and house martin eggs. We found a rundown farm complex consisting of a house and a few barns and began poking around to see what we could find. As we looked around one of the barns, I wasn't sure if the place was derelict or not but I wasn't much bothered. After a few minutes looking, we found some ducks' nests and we swiped a couple of eggs each. We were both congratulating ourselves on our find when we heard the noise of someone approaching: time to do a runner!

George took off and was soon clean away but I was a little slower off the mark, took a wrong turn and found myself confronted by a farmer who was shouting and waving at me angrily.

'Have you been fucking stealing my duck eggs?'

I was still holding on to them so there seemed little point in arguing.

He asked me my name and where I lived, and then drove me home in a clapped out old van. When we got to our house, he knocked on the door and when Dad answered, he told him what had happened. Dad apologised to him and asked if he could deal with me, then he sent me up to my room while they continued to talk on the doorstep. A little while later, Dad came up to my room. Without any formalities, he unleashed six of the best on my backside with his belt, which really bloody hurt. Then he dropped his bombshell: the farmer was going to report me to the police; the only way I

could avoid prosecution and a criminal record was by signing up with the army. I was shitting myself. I thought: *I'm only 15, how can I join the army?*

The next morning, Dad took me to the army recruiting office in Carlisle.

'Russell has come to join the army,' he announced to the recruiter. I had my long hair, tight jeans and stacked heels on but I imagine the recruiting sergeant had seen it all before and sat me down to do the written test. A couple of days later I had to turn up at the local recreation ground to do the physical test, which was a cross-country run. Now I may not have been the sharpest knife in the drawer academically but I was fit as a butcher's dog and I beat the 20 or 30 other hopefuls by a mile.

Not long afterwards, the result of the written test came back. I was to join the 'Junior Leaders' Regiment Royal Artillery' (or JLRRA) to be trained as a potential Gunner NCO. Dad was over the moon. I was nowhere near as happy: *I can't join the army; they'll make me cut my hair and wear a uniform!*

I still hadn't twigged that he'd tricked me. As I fooled around in my last few weeks at school in the summer of 1965 a letter arrived for me. I was to report to the JLRRA at Bramcote, near Nuneaton in Warwickshire on 15 September. *Shit!*

The only thing the army had going for it was that you got paid. Other than that I couldn't think of anything attractive about it. My mate Neville Jackson had joined a few months before and I'd seen him when he came back to Carlisle on leave. He told me he was enjoying it, which slightly softened the prospect – Neville didn't strike me as the army type any more than I was – but I still couldn't see where it was going to take me.

CHAPTER TWO
BOY SOLDIER

At the beginning of September a brown envelope dropped through the letterbox ‘On Her Majesty’s Service’. It was addressed to Dad. It contained a pink army rail warrant, Carlisle–Nuneaton direct, second class, one way, and a brief list of the kit I would need to take with me: washing and shaving things, some civilian clothes but not much more than that.

The 15th came around very quickly and, that morning, Dad and Dorothy gave me a lift to the station. Dorothy was a kind, easy-going woman and I was happy to have her as my new mum: I really didn’t want to leave them. The train pulled in to the station and we all had a quick hug to say goodbye. I got aboard with my cheap suitcase and as we pulled away from the platform, they waved me goodbye. I don’t know how they felt but I was trying and failing to hold back the tears.

As the train chugged steadily south I managed to pull myself together enough to get chatting to a few of the other lads from Carlisle who were making the same journey. We were all deeply apprehensive about what was ahead of us but, funnily enough, the biggest thing worrying me at that particular moment was the fact that I hadn’t had a haircut. The other boys on the train all had short, neat haircuts whereas I was still sporting a shoulder length Mick Jagger mop. As it turned out I needn’t have worried.

The idea of the ‘Junior Leaders’ scheme in the army in the 1960s up to the 1990s was to take 15- and 16-year-olds and prepare them over a two-year period to be future NCOs and warrant officers in the adult, regular army. A lot of bollocks is spouted these days about how the British Army recruits ‘child soldiers’, as if we were going to be sent out to fight as kids, but it wasn’t really like that. In fact, although the training programme did include all the usual elements of basic training – drill, weapons, physical training (PT), fieldcraft, and so on – quite a lot of it was also about leadership and education. This meant that we would be going on various ‘adventurous training’ courses and expeditions to get us used to the idea of leading and working in small teams; but we would also be doing our ‘Army Certificate of

Education', which meant that by the time we finished there we would have the necessary academic qualifications for eventual promotion to senior NCO and warrant officer rank, and even commissioning further down the line. Of course, being the army, it was going to start with the nasty bit: basic training.

We seemed to arrive in Nuneaton in no time at all and as I got off the train, I could see quite a few other lads milling aimlessly around the platform, clutching their suitcases nervously. There were also several men in sharply pressed khaki flannel shirts and green denim trousers, wearing dark blue berets and highly polished black ankle boots with wool puttees. They were on the lookout for what they called 'Nigs'.

'Nig', we soon learned, stood for 'New Intake Gunner'. Yeah, right. You can work out what it derived from and I suppose the best thing to say is that attitudes were different back then. Suffice to say that we were all white but, for the next three months, they were going to treat us like absolute shit.

We were rounded up on the station platform and our names were checked off against a list; then we were loaded onto an old army charabanc and driven to Bramcote Barracks, a late Victorian pile in the heart of the Warwickshire countryside which housed the JLRRA. I don't know how anyone else felt but my heart was in freefall.

At the barracks the first thing that happened was that we were taken to the block which housed the NAAFI and cookhouse and sat down in front of a pile of forms which we were instructed to fill out. While we were working through the paperwork, we were pulled out in small groups and taken to a side room where, lying in wait, was the fucking barber. By the time I got there, the floor of the barbershop was nearly ankle deep in hair. When my turn came, he gave me a particularly evil grin as he pushed me back into his chair and wrapped his grubby towel round my neck. There was no question of 'How would Sir like it?' Instead, it was the clippers with the 'Number 1' head on and *schunk, schunk, schunk* straight down to the wood. It took less than two minutes and he didn't even offer me something for the weekend.

As I got out of the seat, shell-shocked, hearing the barber shout 'Next!', I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I looked like a convict.

Immediately after the haircut I was taken into another side room where an ID photograph was taken of me, holding a little board with my new army number on it under my chin. Then it was back to completing the documentation. I already hated everything about the place.

Once all the admin, documentation, haircuts and photos had been sorted

out we were organised into groups and taken on a whistlestop tour of the camp by the instructors, then led to the blocks which would be our accommodation for the next three months. There were about 60 lads in my intake and we were organised into two squads. Squad 1 got the downstairs accommodation – two mirror-image 15-man rooms together with washrooms and toilets – and Squad 2, which I was in, got exactly the same thing upstairs.

The accommodation wasn't luxurious. I got a steel-framed bed, a bedside locker and a wardrobe, and that was it. With bed-spaces allocated, we were then marched off to the quartermaster's store for kit issue, receiving a bewildering collection of clothing, combat kit, boots, belts, braces, hats and PT gear, all of which had to be crammed into a kit-bag so we could get it back to the accommodation.

Once we had been issued our kit, we were assembled as a squad back in one of the rooms where we were to meet our instructors properly for the first time. This was when the troop sergeant laid down the law:

'From here on in, you're fucking Nigs and you do exactly what we tell you: got that?'

There were a few mumbled responses.

'I said, have you fucking got that?' he growled angrily. A few more of us Nigs spoke up.

'Yes, Sir.'

'First, you don't call me Sir: that's for officers. I work for a living. You call me "Sergeant" when you speak to me, understand?'

'Yes, Sergeant,' we responded.

'These gentlemen,' he indicated the other uniformed instructors, 'you'll call "Bombardier" or "Staff", understand?'

He continued on, explaining how every time we fucked up, got something wrong or committed any of an infinite number of crimes we'd be punished; how we would be responsible for keeping our kit and our bed-spaces immaculately clean and tidy at all times; and how we would collectively keep all other parts of the block neat and ship-shape. After this introduction, the section bombardiers took over.

For the first couple of days, we learned how to sort out our kit. Our bedding had to be made up every morning into a bed-block, with blankets, sheets and pillowcases precisely folded and ironed into shape and our pillows neatly stacked at the head of the bed. All uniform that we weren't wearing had to be clean and ironed and hung up in our wardrobes or laid out in our

bedside lockers according to a precise pattern. All of our boots and shoes needed to be cleaned and polished to a high standard, not forgetting the soles. Our washing and shaving kit had to be as clean as if we'd never used it. This last wasn't so difficult for me. At 15 I'd never had to shave and wouldn't do for a while yet.

It was all very 'monkey see, monkey do'. As far as the instructors were concerned, once they'd shown us what to do, it was up to us to get on and do it. If you didn't understand something, you could ask them to show you again and they would, but if you then fucked up, you were punished.

Reveille every morning was at 6am followed by breakfast at 7am. After that, we were on our own time until a barrack room inspection at 8.30am but woe betide anyone who didn't fill every second of that with cleaning, pressing and ironing their kit; sweeping and dusting their bed-space; or getting on with collective block jobs like cleaning the bogs and windows, and bumpering the floor. The inspection was an opportunity for the NCOs to hit us with their 'Little Hitler' act. Every wrinkle in our bed-blocks was an abomination and every speck of dust in our lockers was a potential plague epidemic.

After the inspection, we had training. For the first three months, the focus was on the basics: fitness, drill and weapons; but any other time was filled out with map reading, first aid, education and any other bullshit they could think up, like shining parades, changing parades and so on. Lights out was at 10pm. The only communication we had with home was the occasional letter. My parents didn't have their own telephone anyway.

It didn't surprise me but I absolutely hated it. For the first few weeks I cried myself to sleep every night – from what I could hear in my room, I wasn't the only one – and I started praying as well, something I'd learned from a short spell at Sunday School when I'd been living with my grandparents in Carlisle.

For me the worst thing about it was that it was completely unrelenting. Everything we did – drill, fitness, cleanliness – was marked and recorded, both as individuals and as a squad, as we worked towards our passing-out parade which would take place in December when we finished the basic training package. We had to compete against each other to be 'best junior leader', and the squads competed against each other to be 'top squad'; and of course, the instructors wanted recognition too, so they pushed us as hard as they could.

After about three weeks, I decided I couldn't take any more; but when I asked about how to leave, I found I had to buy my way out and that would cost me £50. It was a lot of money in those days and far more than I could afford but if I'd had it, I'd have been out of the door in seconds flat.

The funny thing was that I was doing OK. After spending most of my life getting into trouble, I discovered that if I did what I was told then everything was more or less OK. Inevitably, I screwed things up from time to time. Block inspections were what I hated most. The bombardier would come to my bed-space:

'What's this, Firmin?'

'My bed-block, Bombardier.'

'No, this, wanker,' he would say, pointing towards some miniscule wrinkle.

'A crease, Bombardier.'

'Open the fucking window, Firmin,' and, with that, he would hurl the whole lot out from the first floor to the lawn outside. Inevitably everyone downstairs would see the result of this performance as I scurried down to pick it all up and remake the bed-block, but I was rarely, if ever, the only one.

We all had to have a pair of 'best boots' that we wore for drill and which we were preparing for the final passing-out parade at the end of basic, and these were inspected the whole time. The idea was that these were polished to a mirror shine by slowly building up layer after layer of Kiwi black shoe polish which we would carefully shine using our fingers wrapped in a wet yellow cotton duster. If they were done properly, you could literally see your face reflected in them but it took weeks of hard work to get them up to the standard and if they weren't good enough, our instructors would rub the soles of their own boots across them and we would have to start over again.

It was at times like this I came close to taking a swing at some of the directing staff (known as DS, a term for instructors). I was still pretty small but I was aggressive and my despair meant I didn't really give a fuck about anything. However hard we worked, they just seemed to pile on more pressure and there seemed to be no way out of it. They wouldn't even let us leave the barracks on our own until we had completed our three months' basic training.

As time went on, some of the lads began to get pulled out of training for being 'incompatible with army life'. I didn't know what this meant but it seemed like a possible escape route for me and I began to try to work out

how to pull a fast one and get them to kick me out without having to pay up the 50 quid; but it wasn't obvious what I needed to do.

The weird thing for me was that apart from the odd minor mishap like dust in my locker and boots not being up to scratch, I hadn't managed to get into serious trouble. Still, I did my best.

One lunchtime I was in the cookhouse queuing for scoff when a couple of 'mustering gunners' turned up and pushed straight into the queue in front of me. Mustering gunners were boys of 17 or so who were in their last term as junior leaders and were preparing to be mustered into the regular army, and at Bramcote they were allowed to wear an empty bayonet frog on their belt to indicate this. It was a tradition there that mustering gunners got to eat ahead of the Nigs and I wouldn't have complained normally but I was tired, cold and wet after a long session on the drill square and one of the fuckers trod on my best boots, duly scuffing them up.

'Watch what you're fucking doing!' I complained.

He looked at me contemptuously.

'Fuck off, Nig.' Then he gave me a sharp push backwards.

I was pissed off enough to lose it then and there, took a swing, connected with his face and decked him. There was a momentary silence before his mates began to pile in on me but fortunately enough the orderly sergeant saw what appeared to be a gang of senior trainees beating up a raw recruit and stepped in to stop it.

My mates from my intake were horrified at what I'd done but once the orderly sergeant had worked out what had happened, it was the mustering gunner who copped a bollocking to go with his black eye. Even so, I was reported and summoned to see my own training sergeant. *Here we go*, I thought, *this is where it all turns nasty, I'm going to get charged and fined for this*.

In fact I couldn't have been more wrong. Once I was in his office, the training sergeant actually congratulated me for sticking up for myself, but told me to be careful about choosing who I hit. That was a bit of a turn-up for the books. Even better, he told me that he was making me in charge of block for the next week, meaning that I got to allocate the block jobs, like cleaning the toilets and washrooms. This was my chance to get the 'shit sniffers' and 'DS Watchers'* to do some of the dirty jobs for a change and the whole episode made me a minor hero amongst the other Nigs.

* DS Watcher = someone who spends their time trying to attract the attention of the ‘directing staff’ (instructors) in the hope of gaining brownie points.

Even so, it still didn’t change my determination to get myself out of the army as soon as I could. It was now November 1965 and we were due to pass out of basic training in the second week of December, after a parade to which all of our families were invited. I’d written to Dad and knew he was coming to watch the parade, and I decided to ask him whether he would lend me the money to buy myself out. I don’t remember how much we were paid back then – it certainly wasn’t much – but as boy soldiers who weren’t out of basic, we only got a fraction of it anyway. We were basically given pocket money to spend on things like snacks and drinks from the NAAFI, boot polish and other cleaning materials, but the rest of it was withheld by the pay office, who would transfer the whole lot into a Post Office savings account at the end of the first term before we went home on leave. This meant I would have about 30 quid to take home for Christmas – a reasonable amount of money back then – and I hoped Dad would lend me the extra I needed.

In the meantime, in addition to the competitions for the best recruit and best squad, I discovered that there was going to be an inter-squad boxing competition and a football tournament. Now this was interesting and I was keen to be involved. In the days leading up to the passing-out, as we polished and pressed our kit to a peak of perfection, I worked hard to ensure that I got myself into our squad team. To be fair, there wasn’t a lot of competition.

The passing-out parade was to take place on a Saturday morning but on the Thursday before we had our final pay parade of the term. Pay parades are a thing of the past now that everyone’s wages get paid directly in to their bank accounts but back then it was a formal process. We lined up outside the troop commander’s office with our paybooks, and then we would be called in individually, come to attention, and salute. The officer would count out our money from a cashbox, whilst the pay bloke entered the details into our books; then we would count our money, check it against the entry in the paybook, declare ‘Pay and paybook correct, SAH!’, salute, and march out again.

On this occasion, I heard my name called, marched smartly in, came to attention, slipped on the polished floor, slid under the table and banged my head on the floor. Seeing stars, I tried to get up but I was so groggy I collapsed again and, when I finally got my pay, the sergeant had to help me out. I was pretty embarrassed but everyone else got a laugh.

On the big day itself I was up early to do my kit, keen that there wouldn't be any hitches and I decided that I would give myself another 20 minutes' polishing time by missing breakfast. Strictly speaking this was a no-no. Breakfast, we were always being told, was a parade not a meal because we couldn't hope to cope with a hard morning's training without some food inside us and we weren't allowed to miss it. I reckoned I'd be OK.

We started the preparation for the parade with an inspection by our troop officer outside the block. It was an icy December day and we were soon all feeling the cold. The initial inspection took about 20 minutes, with the officer and NCOs checking us from top to bottom but, for once, everything was perfect and we were marched out onto the square to form up and wait for the commanding officer. We'd been there for about 15 minutes when I suddenly started feeling light headed. This was the lack of breakfast kicking in. I tried to stay upright but, all of a sudden, I found myself sprawled in a heap on the ground: I'd fainted.

I was helped back to block to rest and was soon feeling better, but I had to go to the MRS* to be checked over and couldn't rejoin the parade. I didn't get in any trouble but I was mortified that I'd missed the parade and was desperately anxious that I wouldn't be able to play in the football match in the afternoon.

* MRS = medical reporting station – the sick bay.

When the parade finished the rest of the lads came back to the block and the piss-taking started. I had a thick enough skin by now that I didn't mind and soon afterwards we were able to bomb-burst out and find our families. As an ex-soldier my dad had enjoyed the parade and we had hugs all round and after this, it was my chance to show him round the camp.

Dad had never seen me play football, he just wasn't interested, but I showed him where the football pitch was and we agreed to meet there so he could see the match. Then the families went off to have a sandwich lunch with the DS whilst we got ready.

When the match was underway, an odd thing happened. I was playing as a forward and I had a premonition that the ball was going to come to me and I was going to score with a bicycle kick. Sure enough, a couple of minutes later that is exactly what happened: very strange.

With the match over I went for a chat with Dad and broached the subject of buying myself out. He said that he would see what he could do when he got

back to Carlisle and I genuinely thought he was going to go along with it. I was pleased as punch. We said our goodbyes and he set off back for the long drive to Carlisle in his car.

Feeling chuffed to bits, I went back to the block for a bath and a clean-up, followed by a debrief from the troop instructors. I'd passed out of basic training – literally in my case – and while, in theory, I still had 20 months of Junior Leaders left to go, I was confident that I would soon be out of it. Even so, I still had to carry on going through the motions. I'd asked to be sent to 44 Battery for the rest of my training and the next few days before Christmas leave were to be spent moving my kit over to their lines and getting settled in.

One of the lads going to 44 Battery with me was Dennis Harrison, nicknamed 'Chunky', who I hadn't known well in basic but was to become a great mate. When we moved our gear over to the 44 Battery block I had a bit of a surprise: one of the senior trainees there was the guy I'd twatted in the cookhouse and I had a few moments of anxiety that he was going to have a go but, as things turned out, he couldn't be arsed. He'd finished Junior Leaders and was about to go and join an adult Gunner regiment. I don't suppose he needed the hassle.

On the day that Christmas leave started, I got up good and early, got my kit packed and then had a big army breakfast before saying goodbye to my mates. I was heading back to Carlisle, of course, but the rest were going all over the country; Chunky was on his way home to Yorkshire. As I was heading for the bus, I was stopped by one of the sergeants:

'Firmin? I'm Paddy O'Brien. I saw that game you played in the other day: great goal fella! Tell you what, I run the regimental football team here: when you get back after Christmas, would you like to come and train with the team?'

This slightly knocked me back, I suddenly felt like I was wanted.

'I'd love to,' I told him.

'Great! Enjoy the break, keep yourself fit and I'll see you in January.'

With that, it was onto the bus and down to the station for the journey home for three weeks' paid leave.

Only three months had passed since I'd boarded the train in Carlisle, weeping at the separation from my family and the thought of what was to come, but in that short time I'd already changed. I felt fit and healthy, I'd grown a bit taller and I'd packed on a bit of muscle. I had a pocketful of cash and, after three months of hard graft, I was looking forward to a taste of

freedom. All in all it was a pretty good feeling.

Back in Carlisle the first thing I did was look up my old mates. I went with George Creighton and Neville Jackson for a bit of a kickabout with a football but then it was time to exercise my new-found freedom and spend a bit of cash. Before we'd started block leave, all of us junior leaders had had warnings about the perils of the demon drink; now was the time to find out if it was true!

Did I dare to go to a pub for a pint of beer? I asked the lads. It turned out they were already regulars at a place by the bowling green which wasn't too picky about serving underage drinkers so off we went. I had never touched a drop of alcohol in my life before this and although it tasted disgusting at first, it went straight to my head. I staggered home and promptly crashed straight out.

Over the next couple of days, I met up with several more of my mates from school and the story was always the same. They were amazed that I'd stuck it out in the army. They knew what an undisciplined wretch I'd been at school and couldn't believe that I'd knuckled down: they thought it would drive me nuts.

Hmmm. With this in mind, I decided that it was time to talk with Dad about buying myself out. Straight away I could see he wasn't going to play ball. The first question he asked was 'What will you do?'

I didn't have an answer for this and I could see the look of disappointment on his face.

'Russell, you have no qualifications, no prospects and you won't walk into any kind of job when they learn you've jacked in the army after three months. I spoke to your instructors and you're doing all right; give it another six months and see how you feel then.'

He was dead right but it wasn't what I wanted to hear and I was furious.

'Fuck you!' I shouted and stormed out.

I tracked down some mates and went and got blind, shit-faced drunk. Somehow I made it home where I slept for 36 hours before waking with a raging hangover to find I'd been sick all over the place. Dad hauled me out and made me clean it up, but the smell was enough to get me puking again.

I learned a hard lesson that day: if you can't handle alcohol, don't drink it. It didn't stop me though and several more times over the course of that first leave I drank way more than I should have done and suffered the consequences.

With Christmas and New Year done with, it was time to head back to Bramcote. After I'd said my goodbyes I got the train once again from Carlisle to Nuneaton, but this time I had a duffle-bag full of beer. I was half-cut by the time I arrived at Nuneaton and needed to get a taxi to get me back to camp. There I got a bollocking from the provost staff at the guardroom who could smell the alcohol on my breath and my first conversation with my new troop sergeant turned out to be a lecture on the dangers of underage drinking and the rules I was expected to follow. As I got up to leave he told me, 'By the way, Firmin, I've got a note from Sergeant O'Brien who runs the football team. Training is twice a week, starting Tuesday at 5pm. Matches are on Saturdays.'

It occurred to me then that sport would be a good outlet for my aggression. It would keep me fit and I would get paid for it. I was resigned by then to spending another six months in the army at least so I thought I might as well just get on and knuckle down to it. And try to keep out of trouble too, of course.

With basic training done, we had a little bit more freedom. We were allowed out into town provided we were smartly dressed at all times, and I had a good set of mates, with Chunky Harrison leading the pack. The training programme was still pretty full-on but the down-time we got meant that it was much easier to cope with.

Days would start with an inspection and muster parade, and then we would normally move on to some permutation of fitness training, gun drill on the 25-pounder howitzer, map reading, education and what have you. In the meantime, I was playing football for the JLRRA team, and was soon competing in cross-country running, cricket and anything else that would get me out of uniform and out of camp. In the evenings, Chunky and I would head down town, supposedly to play darts but actually to neck a couple of pints and have a good time.

Not long after my 16th birthday, I was asked if I wanted to go skiing in Norway. The answer was yes, it was something I'd always wanted to do but, coming from my background, I'd never had the opportunity. It was fantastic. A group of us drew skis and equipment from the stores and off we set, heading for a place called Geilo where we would be based.

For the first couple of days, the instructors taught us the basics and after that, once I'd learned to stand up and make some basic turns, I thought I was a ski god and I was off. Nothing frightened me. We were skiing all day and

pissing it up every evening. And we were getting paid for it! Fantastic.

It all went horribly wrong for me on about the fourth or fifth day. I set off on the ski lift having had too much to drink the night before, and was a little behind the rest of the group as they set off. I lost touch with them and found myself skiing the instructors' route rather than the novice route where everyone else was. I started to pick up speed and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it. Suddenly there were pine trees everywhere and no way I could make a turn, so I pinned back my ears and carried on down the hill in a straight line. I'd probably only gone a couple of hundred yards when BANG! I hit some pine branches, lost a ski and then piled straight into a tree. *Ouch*.

I was winded and I'd hurt an arm and a leg but there was nobody around to pick me up because they'd all gone a different way. When I'd got my breath back, I dusted myself down, found my skis, put them over my shoulder and hobbled down the hill. When I eventually met up with the rest of the group, there was no sympathy at all: they thought it was a huge joke, but they helped me back to the chalet and that was the end of my first ski adventure. For the rest of the trip, they had fun on the slopes while I would find myself a café or a bar and amuse myself there.

As time passed back at Bramcote, I increasingly realised that I was enjoying life in the army and my desire to buy my way out of it slowly faded away. I'd turned up there as a five foot two, skinny, undisciplined runt but by the time I reached my last term, I was five foot ten, weighed ten and a half stone, and was fit as fuck. I'd learned self-discipline, I'd learned self-motivation and the harder the challenge I faced, the better it was for me. From the military point of view I tried to be the best at everything but I'd also earned a reputation as the best footballer in the regiment and that really pleased me too. I didn't ever earn a promotion there because I refused to play the expected arse-kissing game but that didn't bother me: it didn't carry over into adult service anyway.

In my last term at Bramcote I was a mustering gunner and got to wear a bayonet frog on my belt. And I took it as my due that I could now push in to the front of the food queue ahead of the Nigs. That was the way it was. In the last few weeks we spent most of our time preparing for our final parade – what was called the 'Goshen Parade' in regimental jargon. A few weeks before the end we were summoned to our troop officer's office to be read our final reports and to give him our wish list of where we wanted to be posted. I

asked for 49 Field Regiment, 16 Light Air Defence Regiment and, I think, 47 Field Regiment in that order. I'd invited Dad to come and see me muster out of JLRRA as an adult but he wasn't sure if he would be able to make it as he was working away a lot at the time, partly in the Middle East.

Finally, the day arrived. I could hardly believe it but after two years at Bramcote, I was ready to move on. In the end, it was almost an anti-climax. By now we could get our kit prepped in no time flat and the inspection went off without a hitch. We marched out onto the square as we had done several hundred times before, we stamped our feet, marched around and were mustered out as adult soldiers. And that was it.

Back in the block, there was a list up on the notice-board with our postings on it. I got 49 Field Regiment, just as I'd asked for, and Chunky was coming with me. Outstanding!

All that remained now was to change, hand in kit and head back to join our families, if they were there. Sadly, mine wasn't – Dad was away – but I wasn't that bothered. I was looking forward to three weeks' leave and then joining 49 Field in Barnard Castle, Northumberland which, as the observant amongst you will notice, is a little bit less than 60 miles from Carlisle.

CHAPTER THREE
GUNNER

Joining a ‘proper’ regiment was huge contrast to Junior Leaders. I was still only 171/2 – not legally old enough to buy a beer in a pub – but all of a sudden I was being treated as an adult and the atmosphere was relatively relaxed and informal compared to what I had become used to over the previous two years. Barnard Castle was a pleasant little market town full of great pubs and really nice people with broad Geordie accents. Once I got to know the locals I found I got on well with them and I managed to acquire a girlfriend called Janet, a hairdresser, who even continued to cut my hair for free after we’d stopped going out. Being close to Carlisle meant that I could get home pretty much whenever I wanted to and I found that my reputation as a footballer had preceded me, which turned out to be a good thing.

I was initially posted in to 143 Battery, along with Chunky, and the first task was to get to know my role on the guns. My gun ‘Number 1’ was Sergeant Chalky White, a man with a vast knowledge of field gunnery, who soon got me up to speed and working as a member of the crew; and I quickly got into the daily routine of care and maintenance of the guns and vehicles within the troop.

More important for me, at that time, was the football. 49 Field was a good all-round sports regiment with strong cricket, rugby and tug-of-war teams but the football team had some real talent to call on. Back then, there were still a few ex-National Servicemen knocking around the regiment, including Geordie Bellamy who’d played for Burnley when he was younger, but there were others too, most memorably our fullback, Derek Skinner, one of the regimental chefs, who used to drink two or three pints before every game in order to steady his nerves. I started playing with the battery team more or less straight away and was soon involved with the regimental team too, as well as playing for a civilian team back in Carlisle when I could get there.

Our normal daily routine was to spend the morning on the gun park doing maintenance and ‘first parading’ the vehicles and guns, then get on with any other tasks that came up. It was much less intense than Junior Leaders, where

we worked to a fairly strict syllabus, and we were given a lot more freedom to do what we wanted to do.

We were in Barnard Castle for about a year before we were told that we would all be moving, lock, stock and barrel, down to Larkhill, on Salisbury Plain, to become the support regiment to the Royal School of Artillery which was based there. This sounded like it was going to be hard work and it was compounded by the fact that for the first six months we were there, we would be living in temporary accommodation at West Down Camp, a run-down, wooden-hutted World War II-era transit camp. As there was no married accommodation, all the married men would have to leave their wives at Barnard Castle, and to mitigate this it was the single guys like me who were sent on the advance party to get the place set up for the rest of the regiment. The only advantage to this was that I got to pick a good bed-space before the rest of the lads turned up.

Nowadays soldiers get their own single rooms in barracks but back then you might find yourself, as a supposedly grown up adult, living in a four-, eight-, 12- or even 16-man room like a bunch of kids in a dormitory. In my room was a lance bombardier called Dennis Calvert who was a bit of a boxer and also, as I discovered, a bit highly strung.

I was bored spending my days cleaning up accommodation and moving bedding around so, after work, I would generally head down to the pub in the village for a couple of pints and a chat with whoever was there, before heading back up to camp. For some reason Dennis always slept with his light on, which used to keep me awake, but when I asked him to switch it off, his response was invariably: ‘Fuck off, Rusty,’ in his broad Yorkshire accent.

After a couple of weeks of this I decided that enough was enough, got my air-pistol out of my locker and shot his light out. He went fucking ape, jumping out of bed and chasing after me, and we wound up having a bit of a scrap. Next morning he gave me a more formal bollocking – he was a lance bombardier and I was a mere gunner after all – and that would probably have been that. Except I was bored. So when I saw Dennis’s pushbike parked against the side of the block I felt an overwhelming and irresistible compulsion to remove his brake blocks.

Not long afterwards, Dennis came out of the block, swung his leg over the bike and set off pedalling towards the front gate. I began to feel a little uneasy about this because if he went out of camp, the road down into the village was on a really steep hill. Sure enough, that’s where he was heading. Christ

almighty! Somewhere on the hill he came off the bike and hurt himself quite badly, and I took off and hid out for several hours in the woods out the back of the camp. Surprisingly he never put two and two together and blamed me, which was probably a good thing. I was lying in bed at night for the next few weeks expecting the iron bar treatment.

After about six weeks of tedium, the rest of the regiment arrived, along with most of my mates, and we could begin to get back into the swing of normal regimental life, working hard and playing harder.

In those days, as a young ‘adult soldier’ I was still learning the ropes and life was all about having fun and doing sometimes stupid things for the hell of it. With all the lads back, the weekend card schools started up and I got stuck into games which sometimes lasted from Friday afternoon to Sunday evening. I won a lot of money in these, but I lost just as much. I started doing boxing training, playing six-a-side football and doing anything else that would catch my attention. Some weekends we would head into Devizes, 12 miles away, for a piss-up and I lost count of the number of times I ended up walking back having missed the last bus, or even cadging a lift home with the milkman on his float.

The six months at West Down passed quickly and we moved into the nice, modern accommodation at Larkhill, with the single guys all living in the block and the married ‘pads’ scattered around various married quarter patches in the area. From the windows at the top of the block I lived in we could see Stonehenge but, at that age, I wasn’t interested: it might as well have been a quarry for all I cared. Just across the road from our accommodation was a good, modern gym and I started to spend a fair amount of time in there; I also took up badminton, of all things.

Because of our role as the support for the Royal School of Artillery we had a mixture of 25-pounder field guns and the new-ish 105mm Abbot tracked self-propelled guns and there was a huge gun park with a wash-down facility where we maintained them. Not long after we moved into Larkhill, I was offered a driving course and jumped at it. I was 19 years old now and desperate to own my own car. I was paired with one of the guys in the battery who would take me out in a Landrover and show me the ropes. My early problem was speeding and a profound ignorance of the Highway Code but I knuckled down and eventually got the hang of it.

My test soon came and it was conducted by Bill Head, who was in my battery but had just passed his ‘qualified testing officer’ course and was

‘Mister I’m in Charge’. We went out, did the test and he asked me a few Highway Code questions, which I got right. Then he asked me how I’d done.

‘I reckon I’ve passed,’ I told him.

‘You might have done if you hadn’t been doing 40 in a 20 miles per hour zone,’ was his response. I started arguing and he said ‘Let me show you.’

I got back in the driver’s seat and we headed off again through the officers’ married quarters. I was still doing 40 when I went past a 20 miles per hour sign.

‘You just failed again,’ he told me, laughing. I was silent for the rest of the drive back to camp.

I had another go the next week and this time I passed. Watch out Wiltshire! I was now officially an accident waiting to happen. A guy called Dave in 55 Battery told me that he had an old Austin Westminster he was trying to sell. It was a great big, lumbering thing but I managed to thrash it up to 100 miles an hour on the Larkhill to Rolleston Camp road and that was good enough for me. I bought it then and there.

The problem I then had was that nobody would insure it. *Shit*. I tried to sell it but nobody was interested. I tried giving it away, but still no takers. I took it up to a kind of travellers’ camp near the Bustard inn on Salisbury Plain but none of them wanted it either. With no insurance, I couldn’t take it back on camp and I was so naïve I didn’t even know how to go about registering it in my name. In the end, I took it to a copse on the edge of the Plain and left it there. A few weeks later we returned there, this time in a 17-ton Abbot which we drove over the car several times to crush it, then took the number plates off and abandoned it. It may still be there for all I know.

My next car was a Ford Anglia that I won in a card school. It wasn’t in the best of nick but it ran OK and I was able to get insurance for this one: now I was mobile.

But for all the fun and games, Larkhill was hard work too. The School of Artillery ran more or less continuous courses for British and foreign students and it was our job to get out and do the live firing that this normally entailed. Mostly this would be with the 25-pounders or Abbots, but occasionally we might be part of an M109 or M107 detachment too. We would get up early on live firing days, get breakfast and then either head down to Rolleston to collect the ammunition if we were on ammo detail, or get down to the gun park to get the vehicles and guns first paraded if we were firing. Then it was ‘get loaded up and out to the ranges’. We did this whatever the weather and

on a daily basis we would be cold, wet and sometimes fucking hot too. With firing over, we would then head back to Larkhill to get the guns and vehicles cleaned up and ready for the next shoot.

On the other hand, supporting the School meant we didn't have to train at weekends, as the courses invariably got the weekend off, and we also got a sports afternoon on a Wednesday. I was sport mad. I played rugby, hockey and cricket for the Regiment, but football was where I really excelled and I soon found myself playing inter-battery, regimental and corps level football, as well as playing for a civilian club; sometimes playing Saturday morning and afternoon for two different teams. If they'd had one, I would have been the captain and star performer on the regimental drinking team too.

But although I was enjoying what I did, as well as getting paid for it, there still seemed to be something missing from my life. I had girlfriends who came and went, although I had no intention of getting married at that stage in my life, but I rarely saw my family as my dad was working away in Saudi Arabia by now and the others who I regarded as my family had all moved away from Carlisle. The army had become my family instead, but I wasn't quite getting enough from it. Leave periods were odd. Sometimes I would go and visit friends around the country; other times I would stay on camp and try to find ways of amusing myself while everyone else was away. Having a car was great, but it was dangerous too as I was stupid enough to drink and drive back then, as did many others. Fortunately I didn't have any disasters.

One day, when I had to go over to regimental headquarters on some errand, Bill Bassett, one of the older soldiers in the battery, asked me to drop some papers in for him at the orderly room. I vaguely looked at them as I walked across and saw it was an application to attempt SAS selection. I had no idea what this was and asked Bill about it later. He told me a little bit about what he was applying for and it piqued my interest but I didn't do anything concrete.

It was 1970 by now and the conflict in Northern Ireland was beginning to kick off in a big way. I knew we wouldn't get involved because, as the support regiment, we were hard-wired to the School for the next two years and this, amongst other things, was leading to a growing sense of frustration which began to reflect in my behaviour. For our 10.30am NAAFI break, we used to head over to a café in Larkhill for a mug of coffee and something to eat, and one day a mate from 55 Battery called Ray Wyre picked up a piece of toast from my plate and started to eat it. I went mad and started scrapping

with him round the café until some of the others pulled us apart. I mean, fighting over a piece of toast: how pathetic is that?

Not long afterwards, a bunch of us had gone down to the Packhorse, Larkhill's only pub, and got a skinful. On the way back, one of the lads thought it would be a good idea to rip down one of the 49 Field Regiment badges from the side of the guardroom and throw it through the window. Pissed as I was, I thought this was a huge laugh and assumed that there were so many of us there that we couldn't be identified. Wrong. I was hauled out of bed in the early hours by the Regimental Police (RP), still pissed, only to make the mistake of starting to throw punches. A few digs from the RPs soon calmed me down and I spent the rest of the night in the cells, with my mate Billy Gerrard in the cell next door.

The upshot of this was that we both got 14 days' detention, which was a real pain in the arse. Billy was the best rugby player in the regiment and I was the best footballer, so we were allowed out to train and to take part in matches, but most of the rest of the time we had to do fatigues around camp, supervised by the Regimental Police. The real balls-ache about this didn't emerge for years but this incident, which was extremely minor by the standards of the day, was enough to ensure that I didn't get my Long Service and Good Conduct Medal. This is a medal you get after 15 years' service in the ranks provided that your conduct sheet is reasonably clean. Mine was pretty good apart from this but the specific charge – and I no longer remember what it was, probably vandalism or offering violence to the Regimental Police when they dragged me out of my pit – and which I'd admitted without any legal advice at all, meant that I could never receive mine, whatever I did in the future. Not a big deal in the great scheme of things, but enough to piss me off quite a bit when I hit my 15-year point.

A couple of days after I was released, I was called into the battery sergeant major's office. Ray Baum was a nice guy and he sat me down for a chat. The message was simple: I had a lot of potential but I was pissing it away; he'd talked about me with the regimental sergeant major and other senior NCOs and decided that the best place for me was on the Regimental Police staff for few months to calm me down. Poacher turned gamekeeper, so to speak.

This turned out to be a good idea. I knuckled down to the work and used my spare time to train for football, spending endless hours running up and down the tennis courts behind the nick, practising skills. After a couple of months as a Regimental Policeman, I went back to my own battery and also

to promotion to lance bombardier.

I was fine with this new responsibility at work but socially I remained a hand grenade with the pin pulled out. I was involved in drunken car crashes – not me driving – pub fights, motorbike crashes and all the rest of it. At weekends, Chunky and I would saunter back to the block from the gun park, each carrying our army-issue suitcase, each of which contained a five-gallon petrol jerrycan – siphoned from the vehicles – which would be our fuel supply for the weekend. At that age I didn't see it as stealing: more like one of the perks of the job.

Through all this time I was playing football and our team – I was the captain – was going from strength to strength. We won the Royal Artillery Cup as well as the army and our local civilian leagues. I was playing for the Royal Artillery as well and, although I didn't know it at that time, several professional teams, including Swindon, Sheffield United, West Ham and Bristol Rovers had enquired with the army about signing me. Captain Byford, a lovely, kind-hearted guy, was the football officer for 49 Field at the time and he put them off for the time being: the regiment didn't want to lose me.

When our two years at Larkhill were up, we were due to head out to Hohne in northern Germany. By then I'd spoken with Jock Taylor, a lance bombardier who had been serving with 29 Commando Regiment Royal Artillery. He had come to us under some kind of cloud but he seemed like a good bloke and I was interested to hear about serving with the Commandos and the challenge of getting my green beret and getting in there was growing on me. I wanted to travel and going to Germany was a start but I'd also heard bad things about it. Back then, alcoholism was rife in the army because booze in Germany was ludicrously cheap and I was beginning to think that that might be a problem for me. I'd been told that once again I would be heading out early to Germany as a member of the advance party.

The next few weeks were pretty dull. The garrison in Hohne was housed in old German barracks that we had taken over at the end of the war. At the back of camp was a big training area known as Hohne Ranges and a couple of miles down the road was the site of the infamous Belsen concentration camp. This was a horrible place. The camp was torched after the war to kill off a typhus epidemic and all that was left was the sites of the mass graves, marked with numbers on stone plaques to show how many were buried in each: 10,000 ... 20,000 ... 5,000 …, and on it went. It was true what they said about it: it seemed ten degrees colder than the surrounding countryside and

you seldom saw or heard a bird there.

I quickly realised that all the warnings I'd had about the dangers of drinking in Germany were true. Beer was cheap and the bars stayed open as long as you had money. After a few nights testing this to the limits I began to get sensible and switched back into training mode, taking myself off for five- or ten-mile runs on the training area every day. I didn't stop drinking but I kept a lid on it.

Our football success carried on in Germany once the rest of the regiment had arrived. We were soon the best team in the garrison and in short order won the Rothmans six-a-side tournament at Rheindahlen with me as captain. After I was presented with the trophy by Bertie Vogts, the German international who was German Footballer of the Year at the time, the Arsenal manager Bertie Mee asked me whether I would consider turning pro. I said to him: 'I must be the fittest alcoholic playing football in Germany,' and he laughed. The BAOR* football manager was standing with us and gave me a filthy look but I wasn't too bothered. If it had been the Liverpool manager who'd asked me I'd have bitten his arm off but the Gooners? Fuck 'em.

* BAOR = British Army on the Rhine.

Part of the prize for winning the tournament was a weekend in London to watch England get beaten 3–1 by Germany at Wembley. Oh well. At least it was followed by a night on the town with Rothmans paying for everything. We ended up at the Raymond Revuebar, getting smashed and watching naked girls dancing, which cheered us up.

Back in Germany we discovered that 49 Regiment was going on a four-month tour to Northern Ireland in the internal security role. Some of the lads were pissed off by this but I thought it was great. The build-up training took place in Germany at the Sennelager training area and it was tough and exhausting, but I enjoyed every minute of it. This was what I wanted to do in the army: not piss my life away hosing down muddy vehicles and getting shit-faced in the evenings.

With the training done we flew out to RAF Aldergrove where we were picked up and driven into central Belfast to occupy the Grand Central Hotel. Our role here was to control the 'segments' in the city centre and the Markets area – with the Markets being the more dangerous of the two.

It would wind up being a split job. Sometimes we were in the segments as static guards, searching people as they came through each check-point;

sometimes we would be in the Markets on foot patrol; sometimes we would be in Landrovers doing mobile patrols round the city centre.

In the Grand Central Hotel, after we were all settled in, we were issued our ‘yellow cards’, the conditions for opening fire in Northern Ireland.

‘Why is it yellow?’ I’d asked when we were back doing our training in Germany.

‘Because the people you’re going to shoot are fucking cowards,’ was the response.

But the reality was that we weren’t even allowed to carry rounds in the breeches of our weapons, so if we did need to open fire we would be fumbling around having to think about cocking our rifles, shouting the required warning and taking the safety catch off. It seemed to me to be unlikely that a terrorist would hang around while we went through that rigmarole.

The most boring part of the job was doing the static guards in the segments but it did have its benefits. When a bomb went off, we were likely to be the first on the scene and, as a lot of shops were being hit back then, we were able to get our hands on all kinds of stuff. When the Paddy Hopkirk Motor Rallying shop was burned down, I came away with a set of rallying spotlights and a whole load of other accessories for my car, and other times I got shirts, ties and all sorts. Everyone was at it, including the police, but in our case we couldn’t take it home – at least not yet – and, for the most part, we stashed it under the floorboards in the rooms we were using in the Grand Central Hotel so we could move it either when we went home for rest and recreation (R & R), or at the end of the tour.

On the other hand the mobile patrols in Landrovers could be quite interesting not least because, as a lance bombardier, I would usually be in charge of my team of four and we were deployed to many incidents. On one occasion there had been a bomb at the Europa, one of the big hotels in the city centre, and the police were already there when we arrived. They tasked us to help them look for any victims and I remember coming across a man’s scalp on the awning over the main entrance and finding the ends of his fingers nearby. The rest of his body was nearly a hundred yards away.

I couldn’t believe the crude savagery of terrorists prepared to target these bombs at ordinary men and women going about their daily business. Deep inside I really wanted to catch someone planting a bomb: the yellow card would have been straight out of the window.

The foot patrols in the Markets were also interesting. Most of the time you might see kids around but they weren't allowed to talk to us as this was a Catholic area. But sometimes there were no kids on the streets and that's when we started feeling nervous. About mid-way through the tour I was leading a patrol when we suddenly came under machine gun fire from the area of the bakery. I returned one round from my self-loading rifle (SLR) and we did a follow-up but there was nobody to be seen, except for a few civilians coming out of their houses to see what had happened. The police arrived and did a quick search of the bakery, but they didn't find anything, which was pretty much par for the course.

There wasn't a lot of shooting in the Markets but we did often get bricks and bottles thrown at us, and a lot of shouting and verbal abuse, and of course there was a background level of car-jacking, bombing and arson going on the whole time. It struck me then that the people involved in terrorism in Belfast were the same sort of people who would be committing 'ordinary' crimes in a normal society and a lot of the terrorism really had a more criminal motive.

Even though it was quite a full-on experience, we did get some down-time and we were able to go out and go shopping, and visit some of the local pubs and a floating disco down in the docks. I even had a girlfriend out there for a while: a Protestant girl called Linda, who came from Dungannon, and we stayed in touch for a couple of months after I returned to Germany, although nothing serious came of it.

The four months in Belfast passed very quickly and we were soon packing to leave. With all the contraband I'd acquired I had a whole lot more luggage to take back than I'd brought out, but I was by no means the only one.

Back in Germany I was sent on a limber gunners course which I passed, and that qualified me for promotion which happened soon afterwards. With my second stripe as a bombardier, I finally got my own room in the block: no more sharing with snoring, farting gunners.

Not long after this we headed down to Grafenwoehr in southern Germany for a big exercise, with me acting as driver of Bill Head's 105mm Abbot. Strictly speaking I wasn't qualified for this but after two weeks driving around the ranges, Bill told me I'd effectively passed my test and put me forward for a Group H tracked vehicle licence.

Around this time, Jonathan Wheeler, who was a lieutenant in the battery, and Warrant Officer Class 2 Jock McEwan decided to organise an adventure training trip. Their plan was to attempt to walk from coast to coast through

the Pyrenees, 400 miles from St Jean de Luz to Perpignan. As soon as I heard about this, I volunteered: what a great way to get fit and have a good time was my reasoning.

It turned out to be a really good trip and seriously challenging too. There were about ten or twelve of us doing it and we would get up at 4am and then try to cover around 40 miles every day for ten days, which was hard going. At first we took it in turns to drive the admin vehicle but as members of the team began to pick up injuries we developed into two groups: an admin team of the sick, lame and lazy and a walking team which ended up being just Jonathan, Jock and me. It wasn't lost on me that the guys in the admin team, who would meet us at the end of each day's walk, were actually managing to spend most of their days sunbathing and drinking beer, but I was enjoying the physical exercise too much to want to join them.

Back in Germany after this it was the 'same old, same old'. Gunnery exercises, football, drinking and fighting. We went to Wainwright in Canada but, while this was a different country, the training was pretty much the same as we did on Hohne Ranges: fire and movement throughout the exercise; moving to a grid reference, bringing fire down on targets we couldn't see, then moving to another part of the area and doing the same thing. We did get some time off at the end and I visited Yellowstone Park and the Calgary stampede which was a laugh, but then it was back to Germany and the usual routine.

Trouble seemed to follow me everywhere I went and, looking back, I suspect it was because I was becoming bored and frustrated. A group of us decided to go to Amsterdam for the weekend and set off in a couple of cars. After we'd checked in to our hotel, we went to the Heineken brewery for the tour because we'd heard that after it, they sat you down at a long table and brought you as much free beer as you could drink. This turned out to be more or less true but a point came when we were asked to leave and we moved on and started bar-hopping round Amsterdam for the rest of the night. One of the lads called Billy thought it would be fun to kick a neon sign into a canal, which he did, but unbeknown to him someone saw him do it and reported us to the police. A couple of minutes later we were surrounded by big Dutch policemen who arrested three of us and took us to their station.

We were all put in separate rooms to be interviewed and, oddly, the room I was in contained several cases of Heineken and Amstel beer. Never being one to look a gift horse in the mouth I started drinking it and, when a

detective came to talk to me, I was even more shit-faced than when I was arrested. When they found out we were squaddies on the piss they were reasonably sympathetic and let us off with a strong warning and an order to leave Amsterdam the next morning when we had sobered up.

Another time a group of us went back to the United Kingdom to stay at a guy called Geoff Crawford's place at Filey in Yorkshire. We spent some time on the beach during the day and decided to go to the Butlin's Holiday Camp for the evening. When we got there, they wouldn't let us in because we weren't staying at the camp but, being good squaddies, we went round the back and climbed over the fence and soon settled into the bar. I suppose we were getting a bit loud because, at last orders, a couple of the bouncers turned up and asked us to leave our drinks and go. I was arguing with them because other people were still drinking but then one of the bouncers pushed me and I smacked him. This immediately developed into a full-scale brawl and several of the bouncers ended up in the swimming pool as we legged it.

Nothing more was said and we assumed we'd got away with it but a few weeks later the British police came out to Germany to interview Geoff. I suppose somebody had recognised him. They had some pictures of the bouncers with black eyes and broken noses which really looked quite nasty. Fortunately for us, nothing could be proved and nobody was ever charged.

One of the local German civilian chefs from the cookhouse, a big fat guy called Rudi, used to watch the football matches on a Wednesday afternoon and eventually asked if I would be interested in playing for a local side, Nach Hermansberg, which was 15 minutes up the road. I agreed to give it a go and went along for training and duly got selected for them. They turned out to be really good guys. I found out that I couldn't pay for anything: they gave me beer and food after every game, and they would even fill up my car with petrol too. By this time, I could basically get six games of football a week if I wanted them, and a couple of games of rugby too.

In 1974 I decided it was time to move on. A lot of the guys I played football with in the corps team were from either 29 Commando Regiment or 7 Parachute Regiment Royal Horse Artillery (RHA) and I thought long and hard about which selection course I would go for, eventually settling on the Commando course.

Before I could do that, we had another Northern Ireland deployment. I was disappointed to learn during the pre-deployment training that we were going back to the Grand Central Hotel and exactly the same role we'd had before. It

was then that I put in my formal request for Commando training. It was make or break time.

Three-quarters of the way through the tour in Belfast I was told to get my kit packed and to head back to Germany so that I could sort myself out and report to the Citadel in Plymouth for the pre-Commando course ‘beat-up’. It was time to move on.

CHAPTER FOUR
COMMANDO

Training for the All-Arms Commando Course was to take place at the Citadel in Plymouth, an impressive-looking fort built in the 17th century to defend the naval base at Plymouth. It was home then – and still is – to 29 Commando Regiment Royal Artillery, which was the largest army unit within the mostly Royal Marines 3 Commando Brigade. That was the unit I had volunteered to join. Everyone serving in 3 Commando Brigade had to be Commando-trained and the two routes to doing that were either to join the Royal Marines, where you did the Commando course as part of your basic training, or to volunteer from the army or Royal Navy for the All-Arms Commando Course. The actual Commando training would take place at the Marines' Training Centre at Lympstone near Exmouth but the preparation – the so-called 'beat-up' – would be run by 29 Commando in Plymouth.

As an all-arms course there were people from all across the army there to do it: Royal Engineers (RE), Royal Electrical Mechanical Engineers (REME), clerks, Ordnance Corps, and even a chef from the Army Catering Corps. About 30 or 40 in total. I was really fit but I wasn't the only one. I teamed up with two Sappers, John McAleese and 'Ginge', who had volunteered for 59 Commando Squadron RE, and they were very impressive too. Johnny Mac was to become one of my closest friends over many years and we took to each other straight away. He was a Scot and so skinny it looked like all his veins were outside his body; he had seriously bandy legs but boy was he fit!

We were issued with a set of green denims, webbing, an SLR rifle and a wool 'cap, comforter' and warned that it would all have to be kept immaculately clean throughout the training and that we must be prepared to be inspected by the instructors at any time. This took me back to the bullshit of Junior Leaders: if I hadn't been through that for two years, I doubt I would have been able to cope.

On the first day we were lined up in three ranks with full kit and equipment and given a really thorough inspection. I guessed that Day 1 would be a bit of

a beasting to make sure we were all put in our places and I was right. A Commando has to be well presented and clean, we were told; we must be fit; we must be trustworthy and reliable; and we must be self-motivated and prepared to show leadership to those we were working with.

They didn't put a training programme up on the noticeboard: at the end of every day we were told exactly what we would be doing the next day and we were expected to show up at the right place, at the right time, in the correct order of dress and with the correct equipment.

On the first day we were shown around the Citadel during the morning and introduced to the assault course at the back of the camp where we were shown the correct method for climbing the scramble nets, how to hold the death slide toggle properly and anything else we needed to know to get over the obstacles.

In the afternoon, after lunch, we were introduced to the 'Citadel run'. There was nothing complicated about this: in full kit and equipment we ran round and round the perimeter of the Citadel until we were told to stop. I'm not sure how long we did this for but it seemed like forever. Inevitably a few began to lag back and fall by the wayside and the instructors watched as Johnny Mac, Ginge and I, and others, tried to gee them up and get them back with the squad. What they wanted to see was teamwork, and they wanted to identify the weak links in the group.

As the training continued, I began to develop a routine that would serve me well in later years. As soon as we had finished for the day and got back to the accommodation, I would get to work sorting out my feet. Why not? These were, in a sense, the tools of my trade, at least on this course: if I didn't look after them, I certainly wasn't going to be able to run with a heavy load without serious discomfort. So, I would check them for blisters and carefully puncture any that I found, before dousing my feet in surgical spirits which sterilised the punctured blisters and also helped to toughen the skin. After that I would give them a good coating of foot powder to dry them out. With my feet sorted, the next move was to get my rifle cleaned and back to the armoury, then to wash and dry my uniform and belt kit, ready for the next day.

Once everything was sorted out, Johnny Mac and I would stroll down into town for a couple of pints of cider and some food to help us wind down and get ourselves in the right frame of mind for the next day's activities.

After a few days working around the Citadel, we were loaded onto trucks

and taken out to the training area at Bickley, on the edge of Dartmoor, and introduced to the endurance course – a six-mile cross-country steeplechase on foot and wearing full kit – and the 'Tarzan' course, an assault course over a series of high obstacles, also in full kit. I didn't have a problem with the endurance course – I'd done so much running by then that I could take it in my stride – but the Tarzan course was a bit more of an issue for me at first, before my upper body strength caught up. Johnny Mac was the exact opposite. Ginge, on the other hand, was a natural all-round athlete who could cope reasonably easily with both, the bastard!

By the end of the first week, several guys had already dropped out with injuries or just the growing realisation that they weren't going to make it but I felt fine. We got the weekend off to relax and recover and I certainly wasn't planning on doing any physical training at all. Instead I spent Saturday doing a bit of shopping and then out on the piss with Johnny Mac, drinking thick local scrumpy cider with a shot of blackcurrant in it until last orders at 11pm. On Sunday, I headed out in the morning to buy a newspaper and read it in a café over coffees before meeting up with Johnny Mac for a couple of lunchtime pints and then a quiet afternoon and evening back in the accommodation. We weren't allowed to socialise with our mates who were already in the Commandos which was a shame, but I understood why. There couldn't be any accusations of favouritism.

The second week was a more intense version of the first, with a significant increase in our workload, and we ended most days soaking wet and covered in mud, which also increased the amount of cleaning and kit prep we needed to do. A couple of the lads dropped out at this point because they didn't like the heights: we were abseiling forwards and backwards down the walls of the Citadel and it spooked them. Oddly enough, both were experienced free-fall parachutists, which seemed a bit odd but there we go.

By the time the third week came around, I was beginning to actually enjoy it. I knew now that I could pass the tests and instead I began to focus on setting faster and faster times in each of them, trying to complete them more quickly than my mates. For me this competition was really important, I had a need to be the fastest and the best and this was a chance to prove it. I thought back to what I was like as a teenager: no goals in life and no motivation; and then look at me now, giving it my best shot to win the green beret; what a difference.

I remember the third week as the hardest part of the course but I finished it

and still felt good and we spent the weekend as usual, drinking, relaxing and getting ourselves ready for the final week of the beat-up.

There was a distinct and deliberate attitude change by the instructors now. Instead of running us ragged they were trying to help us through it and I appreciated that. They knew that the guys who had come this far would probably make it through the Commando course at Lympstone itself, so they were making sure we got there in good order. We still had to pass the tests, of course, but after what we'd gone through, that wasn't so much of a problem. The only hiccup was that Ginge managed to break his ankle and couldn't complete the course. He came back for the next one and passed with flying colours.

We had the usual end of course piss-up with the instructors and this turned out to be a real marathon session. I woke up at 6am on a park bench on the Hoe, overlooking the sea, and staggered back to the accommodation, only to find it half empty as many of the lads had managed to trap-off with local girls. I slept through until mid-afternoon and then got something to eat before heading off into town with Johnny Mac for even more boozing. I can't say I remember what happened next.

I spent the Sunday out on Dartmoor, sweating out the booze I'd consumed over the past two days by running and walking over the hills and I've got to say I had more fun putting it in than getting it out. When I'd driven back to the Citadel in the afternoon, I sorted out my kit ready for the move down to Lympstone the next morning.

The Commando Training Centre Royal Marines at Lympstone was like stepping back in time to Junior Leaders. Everywhere Marines recruits, with hair cut back to the wood, were being beasted around by smartly dressed instructors yelling at them at high volume, and I soon realised that it would be the same for us, despite the fact that we were all experienced soldiers and NCOs.

Our first activity turned out to be an inspection in our Number 2 dress uniforms and best boots which struck me as odd but I soon found out why they did it. Having paraded in our best uniforms, we were then marched over to the quartermaster's department and issued with a mattress cover. We then signed over all the extra clothing and equipment we would need for the coming weeks, which we had to squeeze into the mattress covers. Once we had this, we were doubled over to the armoury to sign for a rifle and cleaning kit, and then to the bedding store to collect pillows, sheets and blankets. By

now we all had these huge ‘sacks’ on our backs and looked like a bunch of military Santa Clauses, puffing and sweating in our best uniforms. With all the kit collected, we were doubled around the camp being shown all the relevant places like the guardroom, the ‘galley’ (or cookhouse to normal human beings), the gymnasium and so on, before arriving back at our accommodation, now soaked in sweat and completely dishevelled. Finally we were given the chance to settle in and get acquainted with the guys who hadn’t been on the 29 Commando beat-up before a briefing on the next day’s activities.

The Commando course proved to be much as I expected it. Like the beat-up in Plymouth it mostly consisted of physical activities although there was a certain amount of low-level tactical stuff thrown in as well to keep us on our toes. The Royal Marines instructors were on our backs the whole time and were not afraid to make us work for what we wanted. For 95 per cent of the course I would have been happy to punch most of them at any time – they got on my tits that much – but the bigger prize was earning the green beret and I kept a lid on my anger.

John Mac and I maintained much the same routine that we had done during the beat-up. At the end of each day we sorted out feet and weapons, then took our laundry down to the launderette in Lympstone and handed it in for a ‘service wash’ while we went down to the pub for a couple of pints, before collecting it on the way back to barracks. Most days finished with the notorious ‘mud run’ on the seashore at the back of the barracks, ploughing through waist-deep mud in full kit, followed by the rope course afterwards, by which time we were filthy and exhausted. Getting everything cleaned up after this was an additional embuggerance.

As the course went by, a few dropped out through injury. It was designed to be a wearing-down process from which only the physically robust would emerge but you needed mental strength to get through it as well. My focus was complete: whenever things got tough, I would tell myself over and over: you must pass and you will pass. I was genuinely scared of failure: I could barely imagine how awful it would be.

The last week was the toughest of all and by the end of the final nine-mile battle run there were only around 20 of us left. We’d lost all of the weak links, together with a fair few who had what it takes but had sustained injuries, but we still didn’t know who had actually passed the course. I was in the accommodation cleaning my weapon for the last time when one of the

instructors came in and ordered us all to parade outside. We were in all kinds of different rig: tracksuits, jeans and t-shirts, muddy uniform too, but we got outside and formed up for the moment of truth. I'd been chatting with John Mac and some of the others and we'd agreed that whatever happened, pass or fail, we were all going out on the piss that night.

We were brought to attention. There was a short silence, and then: 'Well done, everyone here has passed.'

Morale could not have been higher. We were laughing and joking and even the Marine instructors dropped their poker faces and joined in. I felt completely elated.

But first: feet; then weapons and kit needed to be cleaned up and handed in; then we would teach the Royal Marines how to drink.

The next morning there was an air of carnage about the accommodation: some could handle their drink better than others but I was in a reasonable state having got all my kit squared away the evening before and I dragged myself over to the cookhouse – sorry 'galley' – for a hearty breakfast, then got into my Number 2 dress for the parade.

It didn't last long. We marched out onto the square and the commandant of Lympstone gave a short speech, then went round the parade shaking each of us by the hand and passed over a green beret, telling us: 'Well done, you deserve it,' and that was it. I thanked him and saluted.

Afterwards, I said my goodbyes to the lads and prepared to drive back to Plymouth. 29 Commando had batteries in Plymouth, Arbroath and Malta back then, and I didn't know which one I'd be going to but I wasn't actually too concerned. What did worry me slightly was that I would be joining a unit as a bombardier where I would be in charge of squaddies who were far more experienced than I was – as Commando gunners at least. Never mind, I would cross that bridge when I came to it.

I took the drive back to Plymouth at a leisurely pace and rather than going straight to the Citadel, I went to a café, drank some coffee and read the papers. Checking my watch I could see it was late afternoon, so I headed up to the main gate, told them who I was and was directed to report to regimental headquarters. I asked for the chief clerk and told him who I was and that I'd just passed the Commando course.

'We've been expecting you, mate,' he told me, 'you're posted to 145 Battery here in the Citadel: welcome to 29 Commando Regiment.' He handed over some documentation for me to fill out and pointed out where 145

Battery were accommodated. I made my way over to drop off my kit and to meet my new colleagues.

Once again I was on a steep learning curve. 29 Commando were equipped with the 105mm pack howitzer, a light, portable gun which was ideal for a unit designated to support the Marine Commandos, but it was one I hadn't worked on before, and now I was going to have to command a gun crew using it. I decided that I would need to put my personal physical training programme on hold while I got to grips with the new job. It could have been difficult but I found I was working with a really sound bunch of lads who did everything they could to help me. We had a live firing exercise coming up on the Otterburn training area in the North East and it went well: my crew worked hard together and drank hard together, and the exercise passed off without a hitch.

Meanwhile, I'd been picked up immediately for the 29 Commando football team and managed to score a hat-trick in my first match against a navy side, and not long afterwards I was selected to play for the army for the first time. This was a real honour for me, but 145 Battery weren't so pleased: the amount of time I was away playing football meant I was pretty much a part-time soldier as far as they were concerned. I wasn't too bothered: I was being paid whether I was in uniform or playing football.

At the back end of 1974 we were scheduled to go over to Northern Ireland for a tour in either Armagh or Crossmaglen. I was looking forward to this as it would be a change from my previous experience in Belfast but before we began the training package, I was summoned to see the battery sergeant major. I was trying to work out what I'd done wrong. I'd made a big effort at 29 Commando to maintain my self-discipline and I'd managed to avoid all forms of trouble, so I didn't think it could be disciplinary but, at the back of my mind, I wondered if it was related to football. I was right.

'What am I going to do with you, Rusty?' the battery sergeant major asked.

'I don't know sir, what have I done wrong?'

'Nothing, mate, but the issue is that you're never here. You're doing your job part-time and that can't work. You're well liked and you do a good job when you're not playing football but we need more than we can get from you.'

I was wondering where this was going, and he told me.

'We've decided to move you over to Training Wing in HQ Battery. You're a fit guy and you'll make a good Commando instructor. I don't want to lose

you but a couple of years over there will give you some stability and you can make a contribution when you aren't away playing.'

I wasn't sure about this, but I wasn't in a position to argue.

'Right sir, when do I start?'

'As soon as you can get yourself across there.'

I knew this would be another crossroads in my career. Working in Training Wing I knew there was no chance of being promoted to sergeant for two years and I was disappointed not to be going to Northern Ireland with my mates, but I felt that if I did a good job there, then maybe other paths might open up. My role would be helping to run the beat-up for the Commando course – the same course I'd done just a year before – and I thought: *Why not, I can handle this.*

It turned out to be a good job. One of the more memorable occasions happened on the very first course I was involved in. We had the squad of trainees out doing the Citadel run and I was in full instructor mode, shouting and beasting the guys to give it their all when a little old lady ran towards me and started shouting that I was a bully and started thrashing at me with her umbrella. I was almost crying with laughter as this continued and even the trainees could see the funny side of it as we left her behind, still screaming at me.

One of my best mates in 29 Commando was a REME vehicle mechanic known as 'DJ'. He was there on attachment but one day he came up to me and told me he wanted to have a crack at the Commando course and would I help him?

'Sure, mate,' I said, 'but you'll have to really throw yourself into it: I won't be doing you any favours.' This wasn't a problem for him and we cracked on. DJ was a really good swimmer but not much of a runner or walker at that time, but he knuckled down, worked extremely hard and passed the Commando course at the first attempt.

Over the next couple of years we became really close friends, socialising together at weekends and even going on holiday to the South of France together one leave period. Another guy I got very friendly with was Jim Cowling, who worked with me as one of the Commando instructors. DJ was eventually posted out of HQ Battery and up to Arbroath and I lost touch with him for a while but there were plenty of good guys around to take his place.

In between Commando courses we got leave and for one of these I travelled up to Birmingham with Stu F and spent some time working for his

brother's building company, constructing a school playground. I didn't mind the hard work but the best aspect was that we were getting paid by both the army and Stu's brother. When I got back I was telling Jim Cowling about this and we decided to buy ourselves a van and start up a window cleaning round which we could do in our spare time. The van set us back £40 but we didn't have any ladders, and we decided that we would 'borrow' the regimental fire ladders that were hung on the wall of the guardroom.

We were in the process of loading the ladders onto our van when Charlie E, another lad from HQ Battery, appeared. He asked what we were doing and, when we'd told him, asked if he could join us in the window cleaning. I decided to set him a test:

'Let's see if you can get the ladders up against the wall to our accommodation,' I said, pointing to our windows which were on the second storey.

Charlie picked up the ladders and tried to extend them by standing them up and pushing the extending section upwards. He was doing quite well until a gust of wind caught the ladder, ripped it from his hands and sent it crashing down across a line of parked cars, causing more than a little damage. Charlie did a runner back to the accommodation whilst we quickly scooped the ladders up and got them on the van. He had failed the window cleaners' selection and didn't join us on the round.

We'd been cleaning windows for about a week when Punchy Murray, a Scot who ran the guardroom as provost sergeant, noticed that the ladders had gone. He went berserk issuing a series of blood-curdling threats against Jim and me, so the ladders had to be returned and our dreams of window cleaning riches put on hold for the time being, which was a shame really.

Instead of cleaning windows, I volunteered for the military parachuting course at Brize Norton and was accepted. Paratroopers have to pass 'P-Company' before they get to actually jump but passing the Commando course also qualifies you for parachuting so I wouldn't have to do it. As things turned out, I really enjoyed it, although the first jump, out of a balloon at Weston-on-the-Green, was a bit nerve-wracking. This wasn't because I was scared but because I simply didn't know what to expect. In fact, it went well, though I did discover that forgetting to take the keys out of your pocket before you jump can leave you with some really spectacular bruises. After eight jumps, including a night descent from a C-130 transport aircraft, I was awarded my wings and proudly sewed them on to my uniforms.

By now I'd instructed on three or four Commando courses but I still wasn't sure that this was how I wanted to spend the next few years and I began to look around for alternatives. I was getting on for 26 and I began to think that I should take a look at SAS selection. A friend had attempted the course and failed a couple of years earlier and had told me how difficult it was, but there was another guy in the 29 Commando, 'Evil Steve' who was maybe ten years older than I was, who had been in the SAS for several years, and I had several long chats with him about it. I also asked the staff sergeant who ran Training Wing what he thought, and he was quite positive: 'You're certainly fit enough, if you steer clear of injury,' was his view.

I asked him if I would be able to take time off between courses to go and train in the Brecon Beacons and he promised me that he would look into it.

It was the spring of 1976 when I put my application in to attempt selection and I decided to give myself a full year to get ready for it, aiming for the summer selection course in 1977. For summer leave I took myself off to the Brecon Beacons and spent my time running up and down the hills. It was a scorching hot summer – one of the hottest on record – and by the time I returned to Plymouth I looked like a racing snake. Chatting with Stu F, he had decided that he would volunteer along with me and I was really pleased: it would be good to have a training partner.

For the next few months we continued with our normal routine of running Commando courses, and Stu and I worked together to build up our strength and endurance which, because of our job, was already at a very high level. One evening, after one of the courses had dispersed, I came back from a boozy night in Plymouth and decided to let off a thunderflash in the accommodation. I'd found it in my kit at the end of the course and should have handed it back in, but I hadn't. I struck the igniter and stuck it in one of the lockers, and it went off with a hell of a BANG! Which obviously woke everyone up but also brought the Regimental Police staff – led by Punchy – to see what was happening. Punchy was really angry but apart from the noise and some damage to the locker nobody was harmed. He was good about it and let me off with a warning but I thought afterwards: *What a fucking stupid thing to do!* If I was going to pass selection, I couldn't afford to be involved in any controversies and I resolved to get serious.

From New Year 1977 onwards, Stu and I really got stuck into training. I was due to report to Bradbury Lines barracks in Hereford, headquarters of 22 SAS Regiment, in July and I tried not to waste a single day when there might

be an opportunity to improve my fitness.

At the beginning of the May Bank Holiday weekend I was sitting in the launderette at the bottom of the hill, waiting for the wash cycle to finish on my belt kit and webbing, when I got a real bolt from the blue. The door opened and DJ walked in. I hadn't seen him since he was posted to Arbroath nearly 18 months before.

'Fuck me, what are you doing here?' I asked him.

'Thought I'd come down and look you up.'

'What, from Arbroath?'

'No mate, I've moved on. I'm at Hereford now. I did selection last summer. I'm in B Squadron.'

This was a real turn up for the books. There was another guy with him who he introduced as Mick R, also from B Squadron.

'Come on, Rusty, let's go and have a drink.'

'Yeah, great idea. I've just got to finish this lot,' I indicated my laundry. 'Then I'll come and join you. Where shall we meet?'

'No, not here, in Hereford. Better class of pub there. Leave your grundies for the service wash: it'll be done when you get back.'

I thought this over for about two seconds.

'Great, right let's go!'

I asked the woman in the launderette to take over my washing and we jumped into DJ's white MGB Roadster and took off. I literally had what I was standing up in.

It turned out to be a fantastic weekend. I stayed in the old wooden B Squadron basha* and we went out drinking at the SAS haunts: the Ulu Bar; the Grapes; the Pippin; the Booth Hall; and various others. More importantly, I got to meet a lot of the guys from the squadron and some from the wider regiment. Taking in their long hair, their sideburns and their generally chilled-out attitude I was thinking: *This is for me, this is what I really want to do*.

* 'Basha' was the term for a jungle shelter from the Regiment's Malaya days. It had become the slang term for the barrack blocks the SAS lived in.

One thing had been worrying me about going to the SAS. I knew that if I passed selection I would lose my bombardier rank and have to start at the bottom all over again. I had wondered whether I could stick that, but this weekend told me it would be worth it and that serving with these men would

more than make up for losing a couple of stripes.

On the Bank Holiday Monday afternoon, DJ dropped me off at Hereford station and I made my way back down to Plymouth, pausing only to pick up my neatly washed and folded gear from the launderette.

Now I was a man on a mission.

CHAPTER FIVE
SELECTION

My job running the Commando course pre-selection meant that I was fit but I knew from talking with DJ and the other lads that fitness on its own wasn't going to get me through SAS selection. Specific preparation was required.

There were two selections every year and I was booked on the summer course, starting in July. There are advantages and disadvantages to both. In the winter, the grass and vegetation on the hills have usually died back a bit and the going is faster underfoot, and you don't have to worry so much about dehydration or heat injury; on the other hand the weather can be terrible and much more of the walking takes place in darkness, mist and cloud which means your navigation has to be spot on.

In the summer, you have to contend with grass that can be knee-high or worse, which really does slow you down, and you need to carry more water to make sure that you don't dehydrate, as happened to a couple of the lads doing reserve selection a year or so back. So it's swings and roundabouts but the July course worked for me and that's what I was going for.

Stu F and I had both booked three weeks' leave before selection started and we'd decided that we would spend the whole period in the hills getting ourselves ready. In mid-June, with my last pre-Commando course over and done with, I handed in all my Commando gear to the stores, packed the rest of my kit into the back of my car and drove with Stu directly to the Brecon Beacons.

If you've never been to the Beacons, they're a range of bleak, bare-arse hills in South Wales, about 40 miles from the old SAS barracks in the suburbs of the city of Hereford. The highest point is Pen-y-Fan, also known as 'The Fan,' which tops out at 886 metres (just under 3,000 feet) but it's not really the height which is important: more the sheer ruggedness of the terrain. There are few trees and little shelter on the hills, which are covered by boulders, occasional rocky outcrops, dry-stone walls and sheep.

At the bottom of Pen-y-Fan on the main A470 road is a derelict youth hostel called the Storey Arms but importantly, from our point of view, there's

a small wood and a car park, and this was where we planned to set up our base for the next three weeks. It occurred to me then that I was in an ideal position to give selection my best shot. I'd broken up with my girlfriend in Plymouth, I'd lost contact with my family in Carlisle and I was able to completely focus on what, I hoped, was going to be the next six months or so.

The plan was that Stu and I would get out on the mountains every day, pushing ourselves as hard as we could across country, and getting ourselves completely familiar with the lie of the land. For equipment, we carried army-issue bergan rucksacks, loaded down with useful gear: sleeping bags, spare clothes, food and water (and a couple of cans of cider each too) rather than pointless dead-weight like bricks. But we had enough spare gear in our cars to add extra weight when we needed to: there was no point in cheating.

On about the second or third day we were there, we got to the top of Pen-y-Fan only to find another group of SAS hopefuls taking a breather and, lo and behold, there was my mate John McAleese with a couple of lads from 59 Commando Squadron in Arbroath. After we'd made our introductions to each other, we had a bit of a chat and decided that we would team up together and try to make the most of the next few weeks.

It was hot that June and for a while I thought about wearing shorts while out on the hills but I decided against it. I needed to wear exactly the same kit I would have on selection itself and if I tried to make anything easier now, it would just be harder when the real test was on.

Our daily training routine was pretty standard. We would get up each day at about 7.30am and wash, get a bite to eat and pack our tents and unnecessary kit into the boots of our cars. Next we would head off to spend most of the rest of the day pushing ourselves over the hills on routes we had worked out together the night before; then we would rendezvous back at the car park in the late afternoon or early evening, having got the necessary miles under our belts.

Once we'd all met up again, a couple of us would take off for Brecon or Cefn Coed to buy food and beer whilst the rest got the tents pitched and the campsite sorted out. Once we'd eaten, worked out the plan for the next day and downed a few cans of beer, we'd crash out in the tents for the night, ready to go again the next morning.

Throughout this training stage, we kept bumping into others on the hills who were doing much the same thing. One was a Parachute (Para) corporal called Yorkie who seriously told me that the reason he was on selection was

that 22 SAS needed him for their rugby team. I smiled and nodded my head, all the while thinking: *What an arrogant tosser!*

On the Friday before selection kicked off we took the decision as a group to wind the training down and give our bodies a chance to recover over the weekend before the fun started. That afternoon we all drove over to Hereford and checked in at the guardroom at Bradbury Lines and, once we'd been ticked off the list of selection candidates, we went over to the Training Wing basha, stowed our kit, got showered and changed and then headed into town for beer and food.

It wasn't long before I tracked down DJ and several of his mates in one of the many pubs in town and a great night ensued. It turned out that there was a vibrant SAS groupie culture in Hereford and some of the girls there knew a lot more about selection than I did. If I'd been round Pen-y-Fan 20 times in the last three weeks, some of these girls had been round the block a damn sight more often. By about 10.30pm, my beer goggles were firmly attached and some of them began to look quite attractive. I had to firmly remind myself that now was not a good time to be thinking about relationships, or one-night stands for that matter, and I managed to avoid any entanglements.

Saturday night was a bit quieter and by Sunday the rest of the selection candidates were beginning to arrive on camp. We still went out for a couple of beers in the evening but it was time to get serious now so none of us went for it and we soon headed back for an early night.

The first Monday morning of selection will stay with me for the rest of my life. In March 1977, the army, in one of its occasional outbursts of sheer stupidity, had decided to disband 16 Para Brigade, the last remaining airborne formation, and replace it with '6th Field Force', which was a brigade-sized light-role infantry formation with a limited, single battalion-group parachute capability. As a result, a lot of the airborne units had lost their airborne role and there were hundreds of pissed-off paras getting used to life in what were, essentially, 'crap-hat'* units. As a result, summer 1977 SAS selection was an unusually large course, crammed with disillusioned Paras. Typical of these was Pete Morrison, alias 'the Mink' or 'Minky', who'd been in the Para Ordnance Heavy Drop Company and who became one of my closest friends over the years that followed. Of course, there was the usual assortment of volunteers from the rest of the army as well.

* Crap-hats (or 'hats') = soldiers who aren't serving in airborne units.

There must have been about 200 of us – officers and soldiers – formed up in three ranks outside Training Wing that first morning. Together with the maroon berets of the Paras, I could see people from the Commando Gunners and Sappers, the black berets of the Tankies, infantrymen, Military Policemen in their bright red berets, Intelligence Corps soldiers in their bright green ones, together with members of the Royal Signals and a range of others too.

One of the most memorable things about that parade was that it was quite clear that the SAS instructors didn't have much idea about how to march or do drill. On the other hand, they did look like they meant business. They all wore the same functional gear: boots, OG trousers,* DPM** windproof smock with a shirt underneath, and all topped off with the SAS beige beret. None of them had starched or sewn-in creases on their uniforms like those of 'normal' soldiers: why waste the effort?

* OG trousers = olive green cotton denim trousers which were similar to the army's 'lightweight' trousers but tougher, more comfortable and less smart.

** DPM = 'Disruptive Pattern Material', the British Army's camouflage pattern.

Training Wing's officer commanding was an Irishman known as Major B but the chief instructor, who would be running selection on a daily basis, was the legendary Lofty Wiseman, an ex-Para who had famously passed selection himself when he was only 18 and had, by the time I came across him, been in the Regiment for 18 years. I didn't know it at the time but his SAS career had stalled when, as squadron sergeant major of B Squadron, he'd fallen out with his officer commanding and tried to twat him, though he only succeeded in punching his hand through the office wall behind him when the officer had ducked. The truth about Lofty was that he was a completely committed soldier and, from my dealings with him, a decent straightforward guy. In all the time I was at Hereford, I never heard anyone say a bad thing about him and that's unusual in a regiment which has a lot more than its fair share of backbiting. Along with Major B and Lofty, there were a number of other instructors: lean, fit-looking bastards to a man.

First things first, they called the roll. This took a while as it emerged that various people who were down for the course had failed to show up. In fact, several guys who did show up and had been issued their kit – basically a rucksack, a set of webbing, a compass, a sleeping bag and a couple of water

bottles – decided that they'd seen enough and jacked their hands in then and there. You could see that they mostly weren't fit and didn't have a snowball's chance of passing. Personally, I wondered why they'd bothered: it seemed a long way to come – some had come from Germany, Cyprus, Hong Kong and some of the other places where we maintained garrisons in those days – just to turn round and go home again. That wasn't for me: I was there to give it everything.

Before we could start training, we all had a medical followed by doing the army's 'basic fitness test' (BFT) – basically a mile and a half jog, as a squad, to get warmed up, followed by a mile and a half at best pace as individuals. If you passed these you were certified as 'fit to undergo arduous training' but a couple of guys turned out to have medical problems and, much to my amazement, a few failed the BFT. I mean, fuck me, if you can't pass the BFT you're technically not fit to be a dental technician in the army, let alone an SAS trooper.

With the formalities complete we were sorted out into squads and each was allocated two instructors. The squads were organised so that there was a range of blokes from across the army in each of them, rather than forming into cliques of Paras, or Gunners, or whatever, and my squad got Brian G and Benny as our instructors: both of whom had plenty of experience in the Regiment.

We knew by now that the first month was effectively the most important part of selection because it demonstrated that you were physically robust enough to cope with the rest of the training. If you couldn't keep up and failed to complete the tasks which were set, then it was fail and 'RTU' – return to unit – normally never to return. If you picked up an injury or illness, on the other hand, there was every chance of a re-course some time down the line when you had recovered. The point was that everything was voluntary. A volunteer is always worth ten pressed men but for the SAS you were expected to volunteer and demonstrate that you had the commitment to prepare yourself properly and the determination to push yourself through increasingly difficult tests. For the next three weeks we would be building up to 'test week', which was reputed to be a real beast.

But having said that, selection started surprisingly gently. I knew it was supposed to be the toughest course the army ran and that many of us would ultimately drop out because of illness or injury but, for the first few days, most of what we did was fairly easy walking with light weights in our

bergans as the instructors made sure we were competent at navigating with a map and compass. The ability to get from A to B in rough and inhospitable terrain is a lot of what the SAS is about and everyone serving in the Regiment has to be competent at it: if you weren't, you had zero chance of passing the course. Most of us in my squad were good enough but a couple of the guys needed some extra help and got it, so that we were all on a level playing field. This first phase of selection took place in the hills around Hay Bluff on the Welsh border. Not as hilly as the Beacons but a good place to do the initial navigation exercises and make sure we were all up to speed.

Right from the word go I decided that I would adopt a fixed routine. Every morning I made sure to be up in time for a good, solid breakfast. The cookhouse was close to Training Wing so it was no great hardship but I was also fascinated by the eating habits of a guy known as 'Wally the Spoon', an old-stager in the Regiment, now into his last few years and serving with G Squadron. Wally thought of himself as a bit of an intellectual and was certainly as fit as fuck. He used to get his breakfast in a mess-tin, rather than a plate, and would eat gigantic quantities of food. Back then, Bradbury Lines was still an old wartime hutted camp and the walls and windows of the cookhouse had several holes in them which allowed sparrows to come in in search of scraps. Wally had a pet hawk which he would bring with him and from time to time he would allow it to chase the sparrows which it would kill for its own breakfast. I somehow doubt that the health and safety inspectors would allow that nowadays.

After training had finished, my routine was the same one I'd adopted for the Commando course: sort out my feet and deal with any blisters; get my clothes, equipment and weapon cleaned and sorted for the next day; then get a good meal down my neck. More often than not, I would then wander into town with John Mac, Minky, Tommy, Gerry Bonner, a guy called Mick, and sometimes a few of the others on the course for a beer or two, a chat and a chance to wind down. Here's the funny thing: quite a few of the lads on the course were spending their evenings doing strange relaxation routines, or downing muscle-building supplements or whatever, but most of us who ultimately passed were the ones who allowed ourselves to switch off and get out to the pub when we got the opportunity.

By the end of the first week, several people had fallen by the wayside through injury or the simple realisation that it wasn't for them, but the little gang of us from the Commandos were all still hanging in there, and looking

forwards to a weekend of hard partying, beer, girls and the rest of it.

The second week was noticeably more intense than the first. The weight we carried each day was steadily increased and the marches were getting longer, and by now we were back in the Brecon Beacons. 1977 was a hot summer and water management became an issue. You only got what you could carry with you which, in my case, was two standard black plastic water-bottles, so about four pints. This meant that you had to replenish with water when you came across streams and so on, so I was usually careful to use purification tablets as I didn't want to wind up with a stomach bug. It's no fun trekking at high speed through the hills when you're shitting yourself to dehydration.

Training in the Beacons of course meant early starts and three or four hours every day sitting in the backs of the old 'Three Tonner' trucks they moved us around in. We'd be dropped off somewhere around the Beacons, briefed, given a six- or eight-figure grid reference for the rendezvous (RV) point we needed to head for and then, at this early stage, set off in pairs to get there. Once we arrived at the RV, an instructor would give us a new grid reference, and off we'd go again, repeating the same pattern for the rest of the day. You were never allowed to write the grid references down or mark them on your map. On an operation, being captured with a marked map would compromise the whole thing so you had to able to remember every last one. It isn't rocket science teaching yourself to do this, but it's surprising how many selection candidates have been caught out over the years for this basic fuck up and sent home.

Every now and again, they would throw in some 'mind-games' to see how we reacted. You could normally tell when you got to the final RV of the day because the trucks would be waiting there to get us back to Hereford but, on a couple of occasions, as we approached, the trucks would start up and take off, leaving us groaning with the realisation that we still had several miles to go. The best thing to do on these occasions was to put a big smile on your face and go to the instructor and get the grid for the next RV; it certainly wasn't the time to start cursing and swearing. Once it had happened once or twice, it stopped bothering me – I was actually enjoying the physical challenge and didn't mind what time we got back – but several of my mates got severely pissed off by it.

The aim during this part of the training was for the instructors to confirm that we could actually navigate from A to B with a map and compass and also

to gradually wear down our bodies ready for test week. All of the instructors carried small, brass spring balances so that, at any time, they could check the weight of our kit and make sure we weren't cheating. But apart from this, the instructors pretty much left us to our own devices. This is also a key part of SAS selection. On the Commando course, the instructors are in the trainees' faces the whole time, shouting at them and beasting them on to do their best, but the SAS left us to it. If we couldn't motivate ourselves to get on with the task at hand, they didn't want us in their Regiment.

By the end of week two even more had quit. The instructors didn't make a big fuss about it. If someone jacked they would quietly de-kit them, give them a commiserating pat on the back and a travel warrant, and they were gone. After another weekend on the beer I looked around my basha and could see that nearly half the beds were now vacant but I was still feeling confident, and my Commando mates were all still there too. It was looking good.

By now we'd begun to develop a relationship with the instructors and they were being genuinely helpful. They wanted to get as many of us through as possible but at the same time, they were uncompromising: if you weren't up to the standard, you weren't going to make it.

Week three was a continuation of week two; but the weights were still getting heavier and the distances longer. By now the training was taking its toll on my body. The heavy rucksack and webbing I carried every day had chafed and bitten into my back, leaving nasty sores and grazes where it rubbed against my skin but there was nothing much to do about it, other than try to keep them clean and free of infection. On the Friday we had the last big effort before test week: the Fan Dance.

The Fan Dance is one of the shorter marches but it was a real beast. It started in the car park on the A470 where we'd stayed while doing our training and the route was up and over the top of the Fan, then down to the disused railway on the other side, then back the way we'd come. The difficult part of it was that we were carrying weapons, belt kit and bergan weighing 75lb and we knew that the time limit to get through was around four to five hours depending on conditions. It was brutal, and by the time I got back, I was on my chinstraps. Once we were all there, it was back on the trucks for the journey back to Hereford.

Once we were back at Bradbury Lines we had a short time to get cleaned up and sorted out, then we had to report to the Training Wing. We knew that the instructors were meeting to decide who would be allowed to go through

to test week and we were all on edge. With us all assembled in the classroom, you could have heard a pin drop when Major B walked in, closely followed by Lofty. There was no ceremony: he simply read out a list of names and that was it. To my delight, I was on it, as were John Mac, Ginge and the Mink. Those that hadn't made it were all gone by first thing Saturday morning.

On the basis that we were going to live forever or die trying, we were out on the piss as soon as we could get away and Friday and Saturday night passed in a bit of a blur. Sunday night was quieter: I wanted to be in peak condition for the first day of test week and that was going to be an early start on Monday morning.

The first exercise in test week was 'Point-to-Point'. Carrying a 50lb bergan, 8lb belt kit and a 10lb SLR we were set off individually to march between a series of RVs, zig-zagging across the Beacons. In the early morning sunlight, the Welsh countryside looked absolutely magnificent from the hilltops but slightly less so from down in the valleys knowing that I had a climb ahead of me to get back up to the top. That day we covered about 16 or 17 miles and I finished uninjured and still in the game.

Tuesday was 'Pipeline'. The bergan weight was up to 55lb and the distance increased slightly, so that we finished the march in near darkness. I was running on adrenaline. Part of the reason for this was that we weren't told what the cut-off times for each march were: you just got told to get yourself to the next RV as quickly as possible. Knowing this, I put my head down and went for it: I wasn't prepared to take the risk of failure and I could see guys getting taken off the course after each event for not making the time: that wasn't going to be me.

Day three was 'Sketch Map', so named because we didn't get a proper map, just a sketch with a few key features drawn on it of the sort that you might have if you were escaping or evading an enemy. In my case I'd sketched my map in permanent ink on the back of a white handkerchief. The weather that day was really shit, as it often is in the Beacons, with unrelenting rain, strong winds, low cloud and mist; easily the worst it had been through the whole process so far. Soon after starting I was piss-wet through, but I managed to struggle on, plodding from RV to RV and I was one of only about four or five trainees to actually complete the exercise. In fact most of the rest were taken off the course, loaded onto trucks and driven back to Hereford with the result being that while the others who managed to finish and I were all soaked and tired, they had all had the chance to get back,

get their kit sorted out and get some rest ready for the next day which was the climax of the whole week. I suppose this did piss me off, in a mild way, but at the same time I knew that I had the satisfaction of having finished that test when a lot of others hadn't, and that gave me more confidence that I had a reasonable chance of passing.

The last exercise was now in sight. 'Long Drag' has become infamous as part of the SAS selection process and rightly so. It's a march of roughly 40 miles over some really rough terrain which has to be completed in around 20 hours, depending on weather conditions. That's tough enough, of course, but it's complicated by the fact that we had to carry a bergan weighing 80lb, belt kit and a weapon. Even though I'd got back to Bradbury Lines late, wet and tired, I made sure that I had everything prepped for the next day before grabbing some food, a quick beer and getting my head down. Lying in my scratcher I was keyed up and thinking about what I was doing and how I'd got there. It was hard, even for me, to believe that I was the same person as the skinny runt who'd turned up at Junior Leaders and cried every night because he didn't like the discipline and his dad wouldn't buy him out.

I also thought about the adventurous training expedition I'd done in the Pyrenees with 49 Field Regiment. We'd managed 40 miles a day then but it had been with light hiking gear and we'd been using metalled roads when they were available. The rules for Long Drag were strict: stay off the roads. There was no comparison.

My alarm woke me at 3.30am on Thursday and immediately I was up and ready for the off. I had a quick wash and shave, dressed and did a final kit check, including weighing my bergan to make sure that it was at the correct 80lb, and making certain that my map and compass were readily to hand. I went to the armoury to draw my weapon and then headed down to the cookhouse where I met John Mac and Ginge for a big breakfast: we all knew we'd need all the fuel we could get.

My body felt battered by the exertions of the last few weeks and the lack of sleep – I'd managed about five hours that night and that was relatively luxurious – but at the same time I was keyed up and ready and I jumped into the back of the three-tonner with a certain amount of enthusiasm.

I didn't dare sleep on the two-hour drive out to the Beacons because I wanted to stay focused and alert and when I was dropped off at the start point, down by the Talybont Reservoir, I was ready to go for it. The march would follow the same basic rules as the others we had done: we would move

from RV to RV as quickly as possible, check in and be given our next grid reference, and then on again. The twist on Long Drag was that if you were too far off the pace, the instructors would stop you and you'd be loaded back onto a truck and taken back to Hereford and failure.

Right at the beginning of the exercise I made my one and only mistake. Once I'd been dropped off and given my grid reference, I had a quick look round to orientate myself and check my heading, and I thought to myself: *I know where that is, no problem!* I stuck my map back in my pocket and took off, almost at a run, not even really bothering to check my heading on my compass. I'd been going for maybe 20 or 30 minutes when I thought: *Hang on, I'm going downhill when I should be heading uphill to a trig point; what's going on here?* I looked round and, even though there was some early morning mist about, I knew I'd fucked up. I whipped out map and compass and very quickly realised I'd travelled more than half a mile in the wrong direction: *Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!*

I was panicking now and set off back the way I'd come at a run. I thought I'd probably lost 30 or 40 minutes and I was really frightened that I was going to miss the cut off at the first check-point. As I surged on, I began to see some of the other trainees in the mist but, as we'd all set off at different times I couldn't be complacent and I didn't stop or speak to any of them. I got to the RV which was a small tent and found Benny lying inside in a sleeping bag. I was soaked in sweat and gasping for breath. He looked me up and down and said, 'Well done, Rusty,' ticked my name off his list, entered my time and read out the next grid reference. I repeated it back to confirm it to him, then checked my map to see where it was and set off again. Even though I'd made the first RV, there was no certainty that I wasn't going to fuck up again and I was clearly behind the curve, so there was no time to waste and off I went again.

This went on all through the day and on into the night. I was cold, wet and exhausted but I kept pushing myself onwards, still fearing that I must just be a little bit ahead of the cut off. I was desperate to pass and I was going to push myself as hard as I could to make sure I did.

Sometime in the late afternoon, I came across John Mac, sitting in the shelter of some boulders, brewing tea over a hexamine cooker.

'Alright, Rusty, how are you doing mate?' he asked.

'Bit of a fuck up at the start, mate,' I told him.

He held up a mug: 'Want a brew?'

‘No thanks, mate: I need to push on. See you later.’

‘See you, Rusty,’ he said, and I carried on.

I was mildly puzzled by this because he looked fine and I assumed that it was just a classic example of laid-back Johnny Mac. I didn’t see him again during the march and only later discovered that actually he’d turned his ankle over and couldn’t continue.

As the night wore on I began to realise that I was doing OK and had actually made up the time I lost at the start, but I still didn’t give up. At around the 17-hour point I was faced with a dilemma when I came to a metalled road which crossed my route. Standing nearby was Major B, Officer Commanding Training Wing, and he called me over.

‘Show me where you are, Firmin, and where you’re going,’ he asked me in his strong Irish brogue. I took my map out and showed him. I suspect he was checking to see if I’d marked it, which was a big no-no.

‘Well done, off you go,’ he said. I didn’t reply, just took off and fled into the distance. I got to the next RV and was given a grid reference for yet another reservoir. By now I felt almost beyond pain. Everything was aching but I just pushed on through it: head down and keep going. I saw a few figures ahead of me and caught up with one of them, a bloke called Mick, a really fit fucker from the Royal Anglian Regiment. We were walking on a rough track now and we carried on together for a bit, chatting occasionally, until we got close to the next RV where we decided to split up before the instructors saw us.

When I arrived at the RV, the instructor came out and said, ‘OK, well done, this is the end.’

He didn’t say this was the end of the exercise or that we had passed. Had I failed? I didn’t know. Looking around I could see the support vehicles that would take us back so I realised it was the end of the route, but I had no idea if I’d made the time.

There was a tea urn in the back of one of the trucks and, after I’d dropped my bergan, I suppose I got four or five cups of tea down my neck and started to feel better. As trainees arrived, we got loaded into the trucks and, when one was reasonably full, they took off back to Hereford. Surprisingly, even after all the effort we had put in, there was still a fair amount of laughing and joking as we headed back to camp.

We got to Bradbury Lines late in the early hours and I got straight into my normal routine: sort out my feet, sort out my kit, clean my weapon and hand

it in. I was too keyed up to sleep and waited for the cookhouse to open where I got myself the world's biggest breakfast, chatting and joking with the other lads who were back.

We hung around in the Training Wing basha for a couple of hours, waiting anxiously to be called out on parade. When the time came we were lined up in three ranks outside the Training Wing offices just like on the first day, although now there were very many fewer of us. Major B made a short speech and then handed over to Lofty, who read out the list of those who had passed. I was delighted to hear my name but sadly, Johnny Mac's injury meant that he hadn't got through. In fact he was already down at the medical centre getting patched up. Lofty made the point that everyone there had given it everything, and even those who'd failed could go back to their units with their heads held high and he was quite right. At least they'd had the balls to give it a go and there was no shame in failure. Those who had been injured during test week were given the opportunity to go on what was called 'Goon Troop' where they would do odd-jobs around camp whilst focusing on getting fit for the next selection in winter 1978. Meanwhile, for those who'd passed, we had a weekend of partying ahead before cracking on with the next stage: continuation training.

CHAPTER SIX
CONTINUATION

For the first week of continuation training the focus was on learning to recognise and use a range of foreign weapons systems that we might come across when operating overseas. This included the various different types of Kalashnikov rifles and machine guns, RPG rocket launchers, Soviet-style fragmentation grenades and a range of other kit from around the world that we might meet.

It kicked off with familiarisation with the weapons and their characteristics, then moved on to stripping, cleaning and assembling them, and finally off to the ranges to shoot with them, which was all good fun. This was followed by a couple of days learning the very basics of close quarter battle (CQB) shooting with pistols. The pressure was off, to some extent, because part of this was us filling in time while the Ruperts* who had got through selection were put through 'officers week'. This was a little extra bit of selection they did to ensure that they could operate and think when tired and under pressure and most of the training wing staff were focused on that.

* Ruperts = officers

Having said that, I continued to give everything 100 per cent. Actually, this kind of thing was what I enjoyed. I'd been shooting since I was a kid, albeit with an old Webley air-pistol back then, and I'd never lost my enthusiasm for it. Even so, I refused to take anything for granted and maintained my concentration: the instructors were still watching us like hawks throughout, not so much to fail us but to nip any faults in the bud before they became ingrained.

Once the Ruperts had rejoined us – and there were a few less of them now – we continued with training in various SAS skills but the emphasis now was on building up for the jungle training course in Belize, Central America, which was the next big event.

We flew out to Belize on the regular RAF trooping flight from Brize

Norton which left first thing on a Wednesday morning across the Atlantic, with a refuelling stop in Washington DC, before continuing on down to Belize itself.

If you've never been to Belize, it's a small country about the size of Wales which sits on the east coast of the Central American isthmus, to the south of the Yucatan peninsula, which is part of Mexico, and east of the Peten province of Guatemala. Naturally, this being Latin America, both Mexico and especially Guatemala claimed that it was actually part of their territory (in fact Honduras did as well, although it has no land borders with Belize) but at the time I first went there, it was a self-governing British colony heading towards independence in 1980. In the 1970s and 80s, Britain kept an infantry battlegroup out there, together with a flight of RAF Harriers and some other bits and pieces as part of an agreement to support the Belize government and protect them from the Guatemalans. Periodically, 22 SAS also sent a troop or so out there to do a combination of jungle training and border patrolling, as well as running the jungle phase of continuation training which took place every six months.

We arrived at Belize airport early on the Wednesday afternoon and the first thing that hits you is the heat, closely followed by the humidity which is above 90 per cent almost all through the year. After that comes the rich, loamy smell of the jungle which is all around. The southern half of Belize is mostly hilly jungle; the northern half of the country is flatter, lower-lying scrubland, swamp and jungle, and Belize City and its suburbs like Ladyville, where the airport is, are at roughly the halfway point.

At the airport, all the new arrivals were met by buses and driven a couple of miles around the perimeter to Airport Camp (APC), the headquarters of British Forces Belize. Back then it was a classic British tropical military base. Neat rows of corrugated iron Nissen huts and single-storey brick buildings, carefully mown lawns, colourful flower beds and paved roads, in contrast to the shanty towns where a lot of the locals live.

At APC we were taken to a couple of anonymous-looking Nissen huts to be issued our kit and equipment. This didn't take long: apart from an Armalite AR-15 rifle with magazines and cleaning kit, the bulk of it consisted of 14 days' worth of rations. Back then, British Army 'compo' field rations came in a little cardboard box designed to feed one man all the calories he needed for 24 hours. You got a small bag of tea, coffee, milk powder and other sundries; a sachet of soup; some packets of biscuits; a chocolate bar;

some boiled sweets; then there were the main meals, which were in tin cans. The point about this is that if we'd taken all of it, we wouldn't have had room in our bergans for anything else, so the first job was to bin about half of it.

With our kit sorted out, we were flown out of APC in helicopters to the training area way out in the jungle. The first task was to re-establish the base camp which had last been used by the SAS selection course six months earlier. The key thing for each of us was to set up our own individual bed-space, which would consist of an A-frame pole bed, covered by a nylon kip sheet to keep the rain off. The instructors quickly demonstrated how to do this and we set about the task. If you don't like snakes and creepy-crawlies, then you had better forget about spending time in the jungle because they're everywhere.

We were told to clear the leaf litter from round our beds so that the big, biting ants would tend to stay away, but there was no shortage of other nasties lurking around. These included sandflies, which go for your ankles and lower legs, giving incredibly itchy bites; scorpions which scuttle into your kit and hide there, ready to give you a potentially fatal sting; leeches which fasten on to bare skin and suck your blood; great big wasps; tarantulas which tend to look a lot nastier than they actually are; botflies which lay eggs under your skin and hatch out into great big maggots which chew tunnels through your flesh; mosquitoes which spend the whole night trying to bite you and give you malaria.

But the most dangerous animals we were likely to encounter were not the insects and creepy-crawlies, or even the jaguars which supposedly roamed the area, although I never saw one, but the fer-de-lance snake. These buggers are not just highly poisonous, being equipped with a neuro-toxic venom which will seriously fuck you up, even if you survive it, but they're aggressive too. Most snakes do a runner when you get too close rather than take on a fully grown human, but the fer-de-lance, known locally as the 'Tommy-Goff,' will often enough defend its territory and will keep on biting until you're down. The problem is that their hunting technique is based on hiding in leaf litter until their prey gets close enough to strike, so they don't move until you're right on top of them. If you're not careful, you're soon in a world of hurt.

The second major issue was the weather. We arrived in Belize at the height of the wet season. Regular as clockwork, every day, it would piss down with rain from sometime in the mid-afternoon until the early hours of the morning.

I don’t just mean a little bit of rain: it hammered down with thunder and lightning to accompany it. When it wasn’t raining, the heat and humidity were intense, which meant that we would always be soaking wet during the day, either from our own sweat or from the rain. We don’t wear waterproofs in a tactical environment: the only way to combat this was to be meticulously careful about how we looked after our kit. It was crucial that we kept the contents of our bergans dry, so everything inside was stored in waterproof bags which we painstakingly sealed every time we used them. The rule was to keep a dry set of clothing which we could change into at night when we were basha’d up, then change back into the wet gear the next morning before stand to. This is seriously character building. Imagine that every morning for several weeks, you wake up in your dry kit in your comfortable pole bed, and then have to carefully strip off dry shirt, pants, trousers and socks, and then pull on cold, wet and – eventually – stinking working clothes. It’s never a good way to start the day, although it prevents absolute misery later on.

The jungle phase, as it’s called, is one of the three major elements of the course and, like selection itself and the later combat survival phase, it’s a pass/ fail test. In the first three weeks we would be learning the skills, carefully taught by the instructors, but in the fourth week we would face a difficult test exercise and, if you didn’t reach the standard, you were going back to your unit. We all knew this and, as before on selection, I was determined to give it all I had.

We started off with navigation. This is completely different in the jungle to what it’s like in, for example, the Brecon Beacons. Partly this is because a lot of the time you have very little visibility because of the vegetation. On top of a bare-arse hill in the Beacons, you can see maybe 20 or 30 miles on a good day, and pick out all sorts of landmarks which you just march towards but in the jungle visibility is sometimes no more than five or ten yards which makes it all a bit more difficult. Secondly, the maps are very different. Because the ground is covered by jungle, most of the maps show the general outline of the ground but little more, so we needed to develop the ability to move with a map and compass, without relying on landmarks.

The Belizean jungle is mostly ‘primary jungle’, meaning that it has never been cultivated and is pretty much in its primeval state but, because Belize is hit by major hurricanes coming in off the Gulf of Mexico from time to time, the vegetation does get flattened, allowing new growth to appear. This creates a ‘dirty’ jungle: the trees aren’t normally as high as they can be in south-east

Asia and other areas we train and operate in, more light gets through to the jungle floor, meaning there are more bushes and undergrowth down there, and there are more fallen trees and branches than you find in a lot of jungle areas.

This was what we focused on during the first week: basic navigation and jungle movement. After lessons from the instructors, we were formed into small groups for navigation exercises around the base camp area, taking it in turns to lead the group but constantly checking our maps and compasses under the hawk-like gaze of the DS, while we fulfilled various pre-arranged tasks.

When they decided we'd got the hang of that, they began to introduce a tactical element to it as we moved into the second week. This meant learning about tactical patrolling, sometimes moving as little as 500 yards in a day to avoid detection, ambush drills and counter-ambush drills. We soon learned to avoid tracks through the jungle completely. Whether they're made by people or animals, they have a magnetic attraction for anyone or anything travelling through the jungle and are an obvious site for an ambush, so why tempt fate?

It was while we were doing this that we began to come into contact with a bush the Belizeans call a 'Wait-a-While' and British squaddies generally refer to as the 'Bastard Tree'. This was covered in sharp thorns that hook into your skin and clothes and stop any further movement. What you have to do is stop, grab the branch and move carefully backwards whilst the thorns come out of your skin and clothes, then move carefully round it. You can't fight the jungle but some tried. I was told that a few on the course just tried to force their way through. It doesn't work: the thorns break off in your flesh and then fester in jungle conditions. If you lose your temper and get aggressive, you lose focus and concentration on what you're supposed to be doing. You just have to live with it: in the jungle, mossies, sand-flies and ants will bite you and leeches will attach themselves to you. That's how it rolls.

I was in a patrol with George F, who was a Marine Commando, Phil Singleton, who was REME, and an officer from the Guards whose name I can't remember, mostly because he failed the course and it was a long time ago. Our instructor was Benny, who I'd also had on selection: very switched on and a really good instructor with a wealth of medical knowledge on the side from his role as a patrol medic.

Once we'd mastered the basics of tactical movement, we began to put it together with live firing CQB exercises set up on jungle lanes with pop-up

targets. This was really demanding stuff, both physically and mentally as you need to maintain absolute concentration, but at the same time it was good fun and I really enjoyed it. This was followed by some basic tracking lessons, teaching us how to read the spoor left by humans and animals. Obviously there are no showers in the jungle, and spending every day slopping around in mud in wet kit your body starts to get a bit ripe, but there was water in abundance – provided you used purification tablets – and we could keep ourselves well hydrated and do a limited wash when necessary. By now I had a decent growth of beard – nobody bothers to shave in the jungle and my feeling was that it helped to keep the insects and mossies off my face – and I was feeling pretty good about it all as we moved into the third week. Benny had taught us a lot and we were functioning well together as a team.

In the third week we were consolidating what we had learned so far with a couple of mini-exercises: live firing, and live ambush and anti-ambush drills, together with a bit of tracking, navigation and close target reconnaissance (CTR), each of us taking it in turns to act as patrol commander. I remember one morning heading down to the river to fill up my water bottles, and while I was there an instructor with one of the other patrols came down to the opposite bank to do the same thing. He lobbed a stone at me to attract my attention and then shouted, ‘Oi, Firmin: why isn’t anyone watching your back? You shouldn’t be on your own.’

At this point, George F, who had come with me, stood up out of cover with his rifle and said, ‘Don’t worry Staff, I’ve got Rusty’s back.’

The instructor threw his hands up in mock exasperation and headed back to the DS area but it was good, it showed we were functioning as we’d been taught.

We had a day back in the base camp, much of which was now knee deep in mud, to get briefed and sorted out for the final exercise and then we were back out in the jungle again. The scheme for the exercise was that each patrol would head out in a different direction to perform a range of tasks, then we would meet up at an RV to do a close target reconnaissance on a makeshift enemy position, put together an attack and then take it out. There would be no return to the base camp for the whole week so we would have to carry everything we needed and leave the rest behind.

The march out onto the exercise was exhausting enough, but it was challenging and, once again, I was excited. Everything seemed to be going well until we stopped for a rest and a map check on a riverbank in between

two RV points. I drank down one of my water bottles but, as I leant into the river to refill it, I was suddenly attacked by hornets. Fucking hell! It was like having red hot nails driven into my skin. I jumped into the water to get them off me, which worked, but the rest of the patrol didn't have a clue what was happening. When I came up, Benny was there and I told him I'd been stung. I had no idea what it was at that point – I thought maybe bees – but Benny took one look at the rapidly swelling bumps on my face and body – I had a total of four stings – and told me, 'Hornets, mate, you probably disturbed their nest.'

Benny got some powerful anti-histamine tablets out of his kit and gave me a couple which I swallowed down.

'How are you feeling, mate?'

'I'm fine,' I told him, 'ready to move on.' In fact I felt suddenly, overwhelmingly tired but I wasn't going to admit this. Meantime, George was in the river looking for my watch which had fallen off when I dived in so we had a bit of a delay. I was worried that we were losing time and told Benny it didn't matter and we could leave the watch behind. More or less as I said this, George reappeared having found it. I noticed that Benny was giving me a slightly strange look.

'You've been bitten by something else too, but a while back.'

He was looking at a pussy white lump on my neck which had two small dot-like marks in it.

'Rusty, I think you've got a botfly in you.'

As I mentioned earlier, botflies bite you and then lay their eggs in your flesh and when these hatch out, a maggot crawls out and spends some time in there, feeding off you and growing inside an abscess before it eventually tunnels its way out. Not surprisingly, these bites can get really badly infected.

'I can leave it in there or take it out now,' he told me.

'Shit, take it out now,' I really didn't like the idea of one of these bastards eating its way out of my neck.

Benny got his medical kit out and cleaned off the area on my neck, then took out a scalpel, made an incision into the lump and gently squeezed out a load of pus, together with the botfly larva. He put a dressing on the wound and then told me, 'Drop your trousers.'

I leant against a nearby tree, trousers round my ankles, and he shot a big dose of antibiotics into my arse. 'That'll keep you going.'

I felt terrible but I was determined to keep going and I didn't slow us down appreciably. We made the RV with the other patrols in good time and waited

there while the close target recce (reconnaissance) team went out to recce the enemy base. They came back and briefed us on the outline plan for our attack. The instructors gave it the OK so we launched, won the firefight and the mission was a success. Good news!

The priority now was to head back to base camp and get packed up and sorted out for return to Airport Camp and then back to the UK. At this stage I had no idea if I'd passed. I did know that 12 guys had been sent back to Airport Camp already as unsuitable but there was no guarantee that any of the rest of us would get through and I was concerned that my hornet encounter was going to count against me. At base camp we had a debrief on the exercise but I knew the pass/ fail decision wasn't going to be made until the instructors got back to Airport Camp which wouldn't be until the next morning.

I was up before first light and got my kit sorted out and then we headed out to the helicopter landing site (HLS) to wait for the choppers to take us back to the relative civilisation of Airport Camp. We got there in the late morning and were straight into the routine of getting our kit and weapons thoroughly cleaned up and handed in to the stores while the instructors held a meeting to decide who had passed and who had failed. Late in the afternoon we were summoned to the briefing room and told. I'd passed and that was all I wanted to know.

Long is the way, and hard, that out of hell leads up to light. Especially if you want to join the SAS. Everyone there had worked their bollocks off to get to this point and it was a shame that some of us hadn't made it. We went over to the NAAFI to buy beer and food and I remember sitting outside the basha until the early hours, chatting, drinking and eating, trying to put back on some of the large amount of weight we'd all lost over the past four weeks. The Guards officer from my patrol had been told he had failed and I did feel sorry for him, but the jungle had shown that he wasn't really capable of managing both the physical side of it *and* performing as an officer and that's what he would have to do if he got through. As Lofty Wiseman had said after selection, there's no disgrace at all in having a go and giving it your best shot.

Next morning, after a huge breakfast, we were taken back to the airport and loaded onto another VC10 for the flight back to Brize Norton. I slept almost the whole way.

In Bradbury Lines, once I'd got my kit squared away, I bumped into DJ.

'How did it go?' he asked.

‘All right, I think. I passed anyway,’ I told him.

‘I knew you would.’ He looked at the prominent hornet stings on my face and the dressing on my neck and asked what had happened, so I told him.

‘Didn’t stop you though, did it?’ he said, ‘Not long now and we can get out for a few beers.’

There’s no rest for the wicked and without any significant time off we were about to start the next big phase of continuation training: combat survival. There are three parts to the combat survival course: the training package, the escape and evasion exercise and the resistance to interrogation exercise. We were joined for this by volunteers from other parts of the British Armed Forces and NATO* countries who wanted to be combat survival instructors but for them it was a learning course; for us it was part of the selection process with a big possible fail at the end of it.

* NATO = North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

The training was interesting enough but we knew the real test would be the two exercises. For the escape and evasion we were to be paired off and sent out into a remote part of Wales, where we would march between a series of RVs relying on only a rough sketch map and directions from the ‘agents’ at each RV, while being hunted by a ‘hunter force’ of regular infantry soldiers aided by war dogs – huge fierce German Shepherds – and helicopters. We would be equipped with nothing more than the clothes we stood up in, and they weren’t good clothes either. I had my own underwear, socks and boots but over that a pair of ancient battledress trousers from the 1950s, held up with bailer twine, a wool ‘Hairy Mary’ shirt and an old greatcoat, coming apart at the seams and with most of the buttons missing. This little ensemble was tastefully accessorised with a wool ‘cap, comforter’, a kind of wool tube, sewn up at both ends, which you can use as a scarf or fold into a hat. We were allowed to carry two ten pence pieces for use if we needed to make an emergency phone call but no watch or compass, and we were thoroughly searched to make sure that we had no other contraband.

I’d decided to take a chance. Before we were searched, we’d seen the trucks pull up outside Training Wing and I took the opportunity to put my watch on the roof of one of them in the hope I could retrieve it before we set off for the training area. Some of the others had decided to conceal standard issue survival button compasses up their arses. When the time came, and I’d been paired with Geordie D, one of the other SAS hopefuls, I managed to

grab the watch without anyone noticing which gave me a minor feeling of triumph, I suppose.

It was like being back on selection. We had a two- or three-hour drive, slumped in the back of the three-tonners as we headed out to the hills. Plenty of time to think about what was ahead. Once again I was keyed up and excited. I suppose it's slightly odd but despite the huge physical and mental effort involved in the process, and the sheer discomfort of a lot of it, I really enjoyed the whole thing. I suppose you have to really, or you would just give up.

Each pair was dropped off at a different place on the training area and given an RV to head for. As the truck drove away, I said, 'Geordie mate, I managed to keep my watch.'

'And I've got a compass,' he told me, pulling a face as he rummaged around in his own arse.

We made the decision that we would only move by night. We didn't want to make it too easy for the hunter force. By day we would find a lie-up in a farm building, or something similar. The problem with this was that the local farmers had all been briefed on what was happening and asked to call in any sightings of us, in return for which they got an invite to a big Christmas piss-up back in Hereford as a thank you, so we had to be careful, and on several occasions we wound up spending the day roughing it under gorse bushes, as the November rain pissed down on us. We were cold and wet but never miserable: you need a sense of humour for this kind of thing and both of us had it in abundance. Geordie was a top lad.

So the next seven days were spent creeping around in the dark, occasionally meeting 'agents' at RVs who would give us information and directions for our next destination. Some of them gave us food too but never very much: the odd sandwich or biscuit, just to keep us moving. On about the third day we found a chicken strutting around outside a farm. Geordie threw a stone at it which knocked it over and I grabbed it and broke its neck but we never got round to cooking or eating it and we were getting pretty hungry.

The only time we ever saw any of our fellow evaders was once when we lay up in a hay barn and found two more in there, sheltering from the rain the same as us, but we often saw the hunter force and came close to being trapped and picked up on several occasions.

On day five, Geordie began to feel really ill. I don't know what it was: possibly something he had picked up in the jungle but it was clear to both of

us that it wasn't safe for him to continue and we decided to initiate the emergency procedure. We could see a farm from where we were lying up and headed for it. I rang the doorbell and explained to the farmer what had happened and asked if there was a telephone box nearby. They pointed one out in a village about half a mile away but offered to let us use their home phone. I refused: we'd been told only to call from phone boxes in an emergency and I wasn't going to fail at this stage for getting the procedure wrong. We walked down to the village and I called the emergency number to let them know what the problem was. They told us to stay put and about half an hour later a Landrover turned up with a couple of the Training Wing DS. Geordie was taken off the exercise and I was dropped at one of the RV points to be teamed up with another pair who were due to arrive there soon. It didn't seem to matter that there were now three of us but I was told I might be teamed with another individual runner at a later RV. I didn't know it but there were now only 36 hours to go.

The final stage of the exercise was pretty gruelling. We were all exhausted from the physical effort and lack of sleep and food but we had to stay sharp and focused. On two occasions we were actually physically chased by the hunter force, but both times managed to get away, although I'm not sure we would have if they'd had the dogs with them.

Eventually we reached an RV and, after I'd completed the drill with the agent, he gave me a bag of sandwiches for all three of us and told me that this was the last RV and we had successfully evaded, but that now we were going to be handed over to the hunter force and taken away for interrogation.

We ate the sandwiches and were then blindfolded, cuffed and placed in the back of a truck. I think the journey was about two hours but I can't be sure as I was sparked out asleep for most of it.

I was woken by the shouts of members of the hunter force as we were bundled out of the truck. I had no idea at all where we were but it felt and sounded like the countryside. I was placed leaning against a wall or fence with my legs apart, tired, blindfolded but alive. It was all quiet but every time I tried to move to relieve the ache in my arms and legs, I would hear footsteps behind me and be roughly pushed back into position.

This lasted some time before I was grabbed by the shoulders and led away to my first interrogation. The blindfold was pulled off and I was in some kind of building, blinking in the light. The first interrogator was a man, trying to be 'Mr Nice'. He could give me food, a shower and a comfortable bed and all

I would have to do was answer a few questions about who I was, what I was doing, where I came from. It had been drummed into us during the training that the only thing we could tell interrogators was our name, rank, number and date of birth – they call it the ‘Big 4’ – and that was what I stuck to. I was starving and exhausted but I wasn’t going to throw it away now. After a while he lost interest, and I was taken back to stand against the wall.

A few hours later I was dragged away to a different room. This time it was a woman but I couldn’t see her as I was still wearing the blindfold. She started asking questions like was I queer? Did I have a small cock? Then she started telling me what she might do for me if I gave her some information. I responded by giving her my name, rank, number and date of birth, but focused on a fantasy about what she looked like and what she might conceivably be wearing – you don’t want to know the details – which kept me amused. Eventually she also lost interest and I was taken away.

It was hard to tell how long it lasted as I had completely lost track of time – and each interrogation I went through was a different approach, culminating with a screaming, shouting ‘Mr Nasty’ right in my face. This always looks unpleasant but by now it was water off a duck’s back. I was more focused on the interrogator’s rank, tobacco-smelling breath than anything he was threatening me with.

Sometime after this, my blindfold was lifted and one of the instructors was stood there, in uniform and wearing an armband. I started to give him my name rank number and date of birth but he stopped me: ‘No mate, that’s it: endex*; finished; noduff.’

* Endex = ‘End of Exercise’

He took me outside and I could see we were on the SAS training area, which I knew well by now, not far outside Hereford. The exercise was still going on for some but I was taken over to the cookhouse for a big breakfast and plenty of tea and, when enough of us were there, we were loaded into yet another truck and driven back to Bradbury Lines.

Once again, the big question in my mind was had I passed? I hadn’t been captured, I’d followed the correct procedure when Geordie got sick, I hadn’t talked during the interrogation. If I’d been marking it, I would have given me ten out of ten but, of course, I wasn’t and there was every chance the DS were looking for something I hadn’t thought about. Not that it really mattered, it was out of my hands now anyway.

Back at camp it was the usual routine: sort out any blisters, get my kit cleaned up and everything else squared away. As we were doing that, the stories started. I couldn't believe that a friend from 7 RHA had failed and been taken off the exercise for playing chess with one of the interrogators; others had piled in for chatting with them, or accepting cups of coffee. This was daft: we all knew that all you had to tell them was the Big 4. I suppose exhaustion had got the better of them and they weren't thinking straight but it seemed a shame to throw it all away like that.

When we were all squared away it was back over to the Training Wing for a debrief. The instructors sat us down and read out a list of those who had passed. My name was on it and I was over the moon. I hadn't just passed combat survival but the whole selection process. I'd made it.

When I passed the Commando course, we'd had a parade and a formal presentation of our green berets but the SAS doesn't do it like that. Those of us who were already parachute trained were told that we should head over to the quartermaster's store to collect our SAS beret and wings when we were ready and to move our kit from the training wing accommodation to our squadron bashas over the weekend. Those who hadn't done the parachuting course were heading off to Brize Norton to start on Monday. I'd asked to go to B Squadron – Big B – where my mates DJ and Stu McVicar were, and that's what I got, along with Gerry Bonner and the Mink. I was walking on air.

We hadn't had a serious weekend on the beer since before the jungle but that's what we got now. It was the first time for six months that I felt that I didn't have the Training Wing DS looking over my shoulder and we let rip. I must have drunk bucketfuls. It seemed like a happy weekend for the girls of Hereford too: they were always on the lookout for new SAS soldiers and this selection had had a high pass rate so there was plenty of new blood to go round.

They always say at the end of selection that it's harder to keep your beret than to earn it. Well I was damned sure I was going to hang on to mine and that was all going to start on Monday morning.

CHAPTER SEVEN
NEW KID ON THE BLOCK

The weekend after the end of selection passed in a bit of a blur, though the beer drinking and high spirits were interspersed with moving my kit out of the Training Wing accommodation and into B Squadron's basha. Back at that time it was still composed of World War II-era 'spiders' – wooden barrack blocks built around a central brick wash, shower and lavatory block.

But first thing on Monday morning, it was time to get started. The group of us from selection who were posted in to B Squadron reported to the squadron office to be put in the picture by the boss.

The Officer Commanding B Squadron was Major T and he greeted us along with the squadron sergeant major.

'Gentlemen, well done for passing selection and welcome to B Squadron,' he told us in a friendly enough way. 'As you'll soon find out, this is the best squadron in the Regiment and we have a great set of guys here.'

I was wearing my sandy SAS beret for the first time and feeling pretty pleased with myself and I guess the others were too.

'But be warned,' he went on, 'just because you've passed selection and joined B Squadron, you aren't SAS soldiers yet.'

I was thinking to myself: *Fuck that! After everything we've been through for the past six months?*

'You are on probation until we're sure that you've got what it takes and there will be a lot of senior, experienced people keeping their eyes on you. If you can't convince them that you can do the job, you'll be on your way. The SAS beret is easier to get than to keep. Don't say you haven't been warned: that's the way it is for newcomers in the Regiment ... and especially in B Squadron. So if you want to stay, it's up to you to perform.'

With that slightly-double edged welcome done, he told us which troops we were to be joining. To my great delight, I got 8 Troop – the B Squadron mobility troop – and I was even more pleased to find that both Gerry and the Mink would be coming with me. I'd asked for 8 Troop because that was DJ's troop but there's never any guarantee in the army that you'll get sent where

you want to go so I was chuffed to bits.

We headed over to 8 Troop to begin the process of meeting everyone, settling in and getting ourselves sorted out. The troop boss was a New Zealander, Captain Alastair McKenzie, who unusually had served with the New Zealand Infantry in South Vietnam before joining the British Army and as a result had a fair bit more credibility than some of the other 'Ruperts' in the Regiment. The SAS is different to the rest of the army because officers only get posted in for two to three years at a stretch whereas the NCOs are there permanently, provided they maintain their standards, which means that the NCOs are usually much more switched on to the system than the officers ever get. The result of this is that, to a large extent, troop commanders, and sometimes squadron commanders too, are often only figureheads whilst all the day to day routine is organised by the NCOs. It's different when you have a strong character like Boss McKenzie but basically the Regiment is run by its NCOs to a far greater extent than most of the rest of the army.

The troop staff sergeant, Steve, was a good bloke but beginning to fall by the wayside a bit, according to DJ who was introducing me to the rest of the guys.

These turned out to be a fearsome bunch. Apart from DJ I already knew 'Brad', 'Gonzo', George S and Mick R, but I also now met 'Valdez' and 'Tak', two of the great Fijian warriors who had joined the Regiment back in the 1960s, as well as the rest of the guys, both in the troop and the rest of the squadron. They made us welcome and, with the formalities completed, we were taken to the squadron quartermaster's store to draw the various bits of extra clothing and equipment we would need for operations and training.

Christmas leave was fast approaching but we were told that as soon as the holidays were over we would begin training for a squadron deployment to Northern Ireland. This was just what I wanted to hear. Having got through the slog of selection, I was keen to get a real operational tour under my belt as soon as possible.

When leave started, I decided that I would head up to Carlisle for a few days to look up my family. I'd basically been out of touch with them for the past couple of years and Dad had no idea what I'd been doing. He was amazed to discover that I'd already been in the Commandos and was now serving in the SAS, and as an old soldier he was pleased as punch. It was good for me to see him too, as well as Dorothy, his wife, and her son Joey, who I liked.

It was also a chance for me to look up old mates. After passing selection I'd part-exchanged my old blue MGB Roadster for a bright yellow Triumph TR6, which was the perfect car for me at that time in my life, and it was during this leave that I managed to acquire my first speeding ticket, up on the A66, heading for a piss-up in Durham.

After a few days in Carlisle I headed back to Hereford for Christmas itself. Quite a lot of the lads were single and lived in, and the plan was for an extended party, taking in Christmas and New Year, before we got down to the hard work of preparing to deploy.

New Year passed in a haze of booze and girls but then it was back to work. The plan was to have a month of build-up training and then deploy to Limavady Barracks near Ballykelly in County Londonderry. The task there was to act as a kind of strategic 'fire brigade' for the Province, ready to be deployed as the security situation dictated in any environment.

This would be completely different to anything I had ever done before and was really why I'd joined the SAS. Training was tough and relentless. In the month before we deployed I must have fired literally thousands of rounds on the ranges with my 9mm Browning Hi Power pistol and nearly as many with my Armalite and the other weapons we would have available out there. It wasn't just shooting at static targets either: much of it was realistic CQB and house-clearing drills, but whereas back in the Gunners when we did anything like this it had been with blank ammunition, now everything was live.

We also needed to learn advanced driving skills. We would be using civilian cars and we needed to know how to drive defensively as well as how to evade surveillance and ambushes. On top of that we needed to be able to navigate at high speed on the move using map books marked with 'spot codes': it's much easier if you're moving at speed to get on the net and say that you're heading for, say 'green four-seven' rather than 'the road junction two miles west of Enniskillen' for example. When we got on the ground in the Province, we would be expected to know all the spot codes in our area of operations.

As the month passed the training became harder and more complex but even though I was often tired out by the end of the day, it was so interesting and – to be honest – exciting that I sometimes wished we could work through the night and I could just get out of bed and learn something new.

As part of the training process Gerry, Minky and I would often find ourselves being put in charge of patrols by Alastair McKenzie. Obviously

there was already a hierarchy in place in the troop but they wanted to see how we would react under pressure: whether we could make sensible decisions. Usually there would be lance corporals, corporals and sergeants acting as normal patrol members under our command but they would be reporting back to the troop commander and staff sergeant, telling them how we'd done. This wasn't to stitch us up but to get us to understand the squadron's operational procedures and to offer us help and advice as required.

If we did fuck up, the squadron had a long established system of fines, paid in to the squadron fund. So if, for example, you turned up to training late, or brought the wrong kit or whatever, you'd be fined a fiver or a tenner – and sometimes more – to reflect the severity of your misdemeanour. At some point during the tour, this fund would be used to buy beer for a squadron bash so at least we all got the chance to drink it back, so to speak.

The backdrop to all of our training was that once we were operating in the Province, all of our actions would be accountable in law. The rules of engagement for all British Forces operating in Northern Ireland, including the Regiment, were written down on an aide memoire known as the 'yellow card'. Basically this stipulated that before you could open fire against an enemy target, you had to be convinced that he or she was presenting an imminent threat to your life or that of somebody else and that there was no other way of stopping it, and you had to give a warning if it was practical to do so. I seem to remember that you were supposed to shout 'Army! Stop or I fire!' or something very similar. I gave this a bit of thought. I couldn't see myself having time to check the yellow card or recite the proper warning in the chaos of a house assault or an ambush and I made a conscious decision that common sense, judgement, knowledge and training would be my yellow card. As long as I was still alive and kicking at the end of the firefight, I was happy to put my hand up and take responsibility for anything I'd done, and face the consequences. This was a real issue: later the same year two SAS soldiers from a different squadron were charged and tried after a farmer's son was shot and killed when he took a weapon out of an arms cache in a graveyard that was under surveillance. They were eventually acquitted but it showed, if nothing else, that the SAS is not above the law. Of course, the IRA* had no yellow card. They could and would open fire when they wanted to, regardless of the consequences, and then run away like the cowardly bastards they are.

* IRA = Irish Republican Army

With the training done we had the inevitable squadron party, then got ourselves squared away for deployment. I drove my TR6 down to the barracks and parked it up, as did most of the other single guys, so our personal vehicles would be safe while we were away. I wasn't married then and had no family to worry about and I was just anxious to get on with it.

We flew out to Aldergrove the next day where we were met by guys from the squadron we were taking over from and driven to our new home at Limavady. The barracks was a mile or so south of Lough Foyle on the A2 Ballykelly Road and it was ideal for our needs. We had our own compound inside the barracks and it was secure and large enough for us to be self-contained for the duration of our stay. We had a large airfield to run around to keep fit; we had our own gym where we could work out; a bar which would be our social focal point; and a 'pipe range' – a 75-foot concrete pipe with a sandbagged wall at one end – which we could use for checking the zero on our weapons when necessary. It also had a resident Labrador, known as the 'Shit Machine', which would eat anything it could get its paws on, and then live up to its name by crapping anywhere and everywhere. My accommodation was a grubby old caravan.

The area I would be working in comprised Antrim, Maghera, Londonderry, Magherafelt, Cookstown, Armagh and anywhere to the north and our first task was to start to get to know it. Some of the places we worked in were pretty friendly to the security forces, others were the complete opposite. I decided early on that I would maintain vigilance and treat everybody exactly the same, and that's exactly what I did. Most of the operational work I got involved in would take place south of where we were based and there were a couple of towns to the north, Portstewart and Portrush, which were deemed safe enough to go out and socialise in, but we were always carrying* and you could not afford to let your guard down too far. Any serious drinking would take place in our own secure bar in our compound.

* Carrying = armed

So having reached a peak of readiness over a month of pre-deployment training and keyed myself up for serious counter-terrorist operations it was mildly disappointing when my first operation turned out to be mounting an observation post (OP) on a set of public toilets in a car park. The information

we were given was that this was a terrorist meeting point. Teams from the Det** would tail the cars of a couple of known players until they reached the car park and then break off, leaving us to observe what happened next. What we established over the next few weeks was that, although two known players were using the car park, it wasn't an arms dump or an RV but a place they were using to meet up with their girlfriends. This usually ended up with them shagging the girls behind the toilets, not realising that I was there, together with the rest of the patrol as back-up, recording and photographing everything they did. The only weapons that were ever produced during these 'meetings' were the terrorists' cocks and, after a couple of weeks, the OP was binned.

** Derived from its division into detachments.

The difficulty we had in all of our operations was that we were only as effective as the intelligence we were given to work on. This came from various different sources: surveillance; informers; and so on, but we rarely got to see the raw material, only what was fed through to us by the Special Branch through what was called the 'TCG', the Tasking and Co-ordination Group. We were supposed to be a high-value asset hitting high-value targets, but some of the intelligence coming through to us was crap and it showed in the quality of operations we were mounting.

A good example was an op we did where the information we were given – at very short notice – was that a meeting was about to take place in a flat near a local cemetery. The meeting was to involve three terrorists who might be armed. A plan was quickly put together for the squadron to covertly surround the building and the flat itself, and then for a team, including yours truly, to assault the flat, make arrests and hand them over to a police team waiting round the corner. We were pretty keyed up as the cordon went in and we prepared to hit the flat and I, for one, was thinking that if the occupants resisted I wasn't going to fuck around trying to arrest them. We got the signal to go and hit the door hard and fast. The clearance went fine but the only problem was that there was nobody there at all.

By now, the neighbours had heard the commotion and come out of their homes to find a bunch of armed men in civilian clothes carrying weapons and it all began to turn ugly. Oddly enough the women were the worst, shouting, swearing, spitting and throwing stuff at us. We buggered out back to the cars and drove back to Limavady to reassess. The big question was had we fucked

up and hit the wrong address? When we got back we went to the operations room to check: no, we'd been at the right place but, once again, the intelligence was crap.

The result was a growing sense of frustration. If we weren't on operations or standby, the squadron bar was the focal point where we could vent and moan. Normally that was the limit of it but sometimes it all went a bit too far. On one occasion we were expecting a visit from one of the top brass in the Province, coming to check that we were all fettled and happy. The night before, after we'd given the whole compound a bit of a clean-up, we had a party in the bar for one of the officers, Mike, from the Parachute Regiment, who was celebrating getting engaged. Some food was sorted out: pie and chips, that kind of thing; and a considerable amount of beer was brought in.

As the night wore on, Mike got increasingly pissed and started acting up enough to get on everyone's tits. Eventually one of the guys, Pat Mac – who was Mike's troop staff sergeant – got so pissed off with him that he twatted him over the head with the big metal container the chips had come in. Mike was put to bed and the rest of us followed suit soon after but the next morning, when the general arrived, he was still pissed and completely out of it. In the end, Pat stood in for him while we kept Mike hidden away. Ultimately there was no real harm done and it didn't go any further, but it does give a sense of the frustration we all felt.

This was compounded by being unable to get to grips with the enemy. I was once in an OP with Pete Morrison, scoping an operation, when we heard an exchange of gunfire from reasonably nearby – certainly within a mile or so. We reported what we had heard over the radio but it wasn't one of our callsigns involved so we sat tight. As far as we knew there shouldn't have been any British troops in the area, which had been put out of bounds because of our operation, so we couldn't imagine what had happened.

It turned out to be a tragic cock-up: a chance contact between a two-man Parachute Regiment close observation platoon OP, which was in the wrong place, and a well-known terrorist called Francis Hughes. The Paras were confused because Hughes was wearing a camouflaged combat uniform and they let him get too close, so that when he opened fire he managed to kill one of the British soldiers and seriously wound the other. Fortunately they did manage to hit him too and he was found the next day hiding in a ditch. I took that really hard. If I'd known that it was British troops being hit, I'd have done everything possible to help them but I didn't, so I couldn't. Hughes died

during the Maze Hunger Strike in 1981. Good riddance.

Towards the end of the tour, 8 Troop were invited to go for a tour round the Bushmills distillery and I remember heading up there with the Mink, Gerry and John McAleese who had now finished selection and come out to join us. After the guided tour, we were taken to a room for a ‘tasting session’ which was basically just free whiskey. Fortunately I was used to drinking it and wasn’t too badly affected but by the time we got to the car park, where our transport and drivers were waiting, the Mink was spewing everywhere and Johnny Mac was virtually unconscious.

On another occasion a few of us went up to Portstewart for a beer one evening. The normal form was to take it steady when we went out because we were armed and didn’t want to attract attention. We arranged to be dropped off and picked up by some of the guys on standby and had a pleasant enough evening, but when Mick R turned up in one of our ops vehicles to collect me, he had an Irish girl sitting in the front with him. I knew this was a big no-no but I was a new boy in the troop, so what was I going to say? We headed back towards Limavady with Mick and the girl joking and chatting away but Mick made the mistake of transmitting his location back to the operations room while the girl was laughing at some gag he’d made, and everyone there heard her voice. When we got back and parked up, with the girl safely dropped off, we were both summoned to the operations room to explain what was happening. Mick went first and, I imagine, threw himself on that particular disciplinary grenade. He got a ferocious bollocking and was promptly RTU’d back to his old unit for good. I was shitting myself that I would be RTU’d too but the squadron command group (known as the ‘head shed’) took the view that as I was new to the squadron, I’d been led astray by older and supposedly wiser heads, and I was let off with a warning; they didn’t even fine me. That was enough for me, though. I loved this life so much that I didn’t want to jeopardise it and I stopped going out on the beer for the rest of the tour, confining myself to a couple of shopping trips to Belfast.

But that was pretty much it. We did a lot of ops but nothing came to anything and we handed over to another squadron, relieved to some extent, but also disappointed that we hadn’t got more out of the tour. Here’s the thing though. We spent a lot of time watching people we knew to be terrorists and who we also knew had been involved in terrible crimes. If we were the ‘death squad’ that leftists and terrorist sympathisers often claim the SAS is, we’d

have had no practical difficulty in killing them and leaving nobody the wiser. But we didn't. Everything we did was accountable to the law and that's how we operated.

One thing had puzzled me in the early part of the tour. Whenever I went to Belfast I was constantly being stopped and questioned by the RUC and British Army patrols, so much so that I took to carrying my ID card in my left hand at all times so that I could show it at the first sign of security forces interest. It took me a while to work out why this was but it turned out that one of the better known Provisional IRA (PIRA) terrorists in Belfast was a dead ringer for me. In fact so much so that we could have been identical twins. Same facial shape, same build, same colouring, same hair and moustache. His name was Joseph Doherty and although he was a couple of years younger than me, we could easily pass for each other. Several years later I showed his picture to my wife and she thought it was me.

This was a bit of a joke back then but a few months later not so much. By 1980, Doherty was part of a four-man PIRA team which was equipped with, amongst other things, a US Army M-60 machine gun stolen from an armoury in Denver, Colorado and smuggled into the Province by American terrorist sympathisers. The M-60 is similar to the British general purpose machine gun (GPMG): a belt-fed, 7.62mm machine gun with a rate of fire around 600 rounds per minute. Altogether a devastating weapon.

In April 1980 an intelligence source found out where this M-60 was. At the beginning of May 1980 – while we were at the Iranian Embassy – the weapon was moved in preparation for an ambush on an RUC Landrover and a team was tasked to intercept them.

The terrorists with their M-60 were in a first-floor flat but as the team moved in, they were obstructed by civilians and then spotted. The IRA opened fire and Captain Westmacott, the troop commander, was hit and killed. Joseph Doherty was the leader of the IRA team, which surrendered soon afterwards. Not someone I want to be associated with.

So, we packed up and handed over. This being 'Big B' Squadron, we needed to leave a parting gift and in our case it was stink-bombs, stuck to the underside of the accelerator and clutch pedals of the ops cars. Well, we wouldn't want the next squadron to forget who'd been there before them, would we?

Back in Hereford, in the late summer of 1978, we had a week or so to sort ourselves out and then got some leave. A few of us decided to take a couple

of weeks in Spain to wind down which was fun, and then headed back to Hereford. Once we were back, I got my marching orders again.

This time it was back to Belize. I mentioned before that Belize was a sort of operational posting for the SAS. As British Honduras it had been a Crown Colony for the best part of 200 years, but since the early 1970s it had been self-governing and was now moving towards full independence, as part of the Commonwealth and with the Queen as Head of State, which was due to happen in 1980. Guatemala, its neighbour to the west and south, had always had an eye on Belize's Caribbean coastline and felt that this might be an opportunity to move in and take over. The Belizeans wanted nothing to do with them. Guatemala was a typical Central American banana republic, governed by a clique of corrupt politicians and military officers whose only legitimacy came from violence and intimidation and while Belize was something of a quiet backwater, they'd got used to freedom and democracy in the British tradition. With independence coming, the Belize government had asked Britain to maintain a military presence and help to guarantee the country's borders and, perhaps surprisingly, the Labour government of the time had agreed, despite a well-established tradition of selling out our former friends.

We flew out as usual on the trooping flight from Brize Norton via Washington and were soon back in the reasonably familiar surroundings of Airport Camp where I headed for the basha. After dropping my kit in my bed-space, I got my initial brief and started to sort myself out for deployment out on the 300-plus miles long border with Guatemala. The task was straightforward: maintain a watch on the border and report any activity by the Guatemalan military. The Guats had their own Special Forces, a unit called the 'Kaibils' based in the border town of Melchor de Mencos, and the fear was that these guys would try to launch incursions inside Belizean territory, possibly as the spearhead of a larger invasion force.

At some point in the first few days in Airport Camp, I bought myself a 'Twat a Guat' t-shirt in the NAAFI and I remember consciously deciding not to pack it in my bergan for my first patrol. I figured that if I did get captured, it would only wind them up.

The big difference between my deployment and the jungle phase of selection was that we weren't in the jungle all of the time. In between patrols we would come back to APC for some rest and down-time; a chance to eat and sleep properly, above all else. But when we were out in the jungle,

nothing much had changed: we sweated our nuts off during the day and sheltered from thunder, lightning and torrential rain at night, while half the insects and creepy-crawlies in Central America feasted on us. Our patrols pushed right up to the border and, from time to time, we did see the Guatemalan Army on the other side. The truth is they looked a sorry and unprofessional bunch, there because they were there, and not because there was any enthusiasm to invade.

Every now and then we would hear big outbreaks of gunfire from the Guat side of the border but eventually we figured out that they would occasionally just shoot their weapons off into the jungle. From what we saw they never came over the border.

The reality is that you can't move in the jungle at night, not least because you can't see anything. As soon as night began to fall, we'd basha up. These patrols were on what we called 'hard routine'. After dark you didn't smoke or cook, and you didn't show any lights. If you were eating, you ate what you had cold. We used the old, tinned, compo rations which were pre-cooked so there was no problem with just troughing them from the can, but they weren't exactly nice. By day, the patrolling was all about stealth rather than speed and it was exhausting, but you had the eight to ten hours of darkness to rest and recover from it.

On the other hand, when our patrol was over, we did get helicoptered back to APC and that was a chance to recharge batteries, both literally and metaphorically. You could wash, eat hot food and get a shower and a beer, and that was good. You could also try to chat up the nurses from the Force Hospital and the clerks from the various units there. Every now and again, you got a weekend off and a trip to the Cayes, the string of palm-covered sandbanks along the Belizean Barrier Reef and that was really special. You could swim, sunbathe, fish and barbecue and it was a huge contrast to the squalor of the dirty Belizean jungle. Even better if you could get a couple of the nurses from APC to go along with you.

When we weren't in the jungle, we had a standby role as a kind of medical QRF* for British Forces and in my first tour out there we had a couple of incidents. One was a soldier from the Irish Rangers who had been bitten by a snake; the other was an incident where two soldiers had broken limbs during an exercise. Most of us had done a fair bit of first aid training over the years and we had several SAS 'patrol medics', guys with a theoretical and practical training much the same as modern ambulance paramedics. When an incident

happened, it was far quicker to get us out into the jungle by helicopter and fast-roped down to the casualty than it would be to get a military doctor and his team in by vehicle and foot. We were able to get to them, stabilise them and get them back to proper medical care at APC far quicker than a conventional medical team could.

* QRF = Quick Reaction Force.

When the Belize tour came to an end and we'd flown back to the UK, I was surprised and more than a little pleased to find I'd been promoted to lance corporal.

The main reason for being surprised was because, by SAS standards, I wasn't even properly qualified to be a full patrol member yet. Every SAS soldier at that time was supposed to have a 'patrol skill' which would be as a signaller, a demolitionist, a linguist or a medic. This was meant to be in addition to their 'troop skill' as a free-faller, climber, mobility driver or swimmer. I'd done none of these courses, but Alastair McKenzie had recommended me for promotion, justified it, and got me through the promotion board. I was chuffed to fuck.

But promotion didn't mean I could bypass training and I found that I was down for the SAS patrol medic course. Once again, I was really pleased because this was one of those courses you do in the army that stands you in really good stead for the rest of your life.

22 SAS was lucky to have a couple of Royal Army Medical Corps warrant officers attached who were gifted instructors – Paul Brown and Paddy – and who were both well liked and highly respected by the guys in the Regiment. Paddy and Paul ran the 12-week 'theoretical' stage of the course, although there were actually a lot of practical simulation exercises as part of it, after which we would be unleashed on a civilian hospital for the next stage. This sort of thing was entirely new to me. I'd been a terrible student at school with no interest in learning, but this was different. Homework had always been something I brushed off, but if I was going to get through this, I needed to get stuck in, and I did.

The theoretical side involved learning about anatomy and physiology together with a reasonable helping of pharmacology. I struggled at first but Paddy and Paul were always there to help and eventually I got through it. In terms of the practical skills, I learned how to insert IV lines and set up intravenous drips, together with other skills like suturing, splinting and a

range of things I would never have imagined being able to do before.

There were 14 of us on the course, including John Mac from 8 Troop and once the theoretical part was safely done and dusted we were sent out to the Accident and Emergency (A & E) department of an NHS hospital to put our newly acquired skills into practice for a month.

The idea was that we would be attached to one of the A & E doctors and would shadow them throughout their shifts, doing the practical treatment under their close supervision. Only the doctors were supposed to know who we were but, of course, word did get around to some extent. Even so, most civilians back then had never heard of the SAS so it didn't cause too much excitement.

John and I were sent to Leeds General for our attachment and while I suppose we could have taken the opportunity to let rip, it was really in our best interests to knuckle down and spend as much time on the wards as we could, so that's what we did. This was one of the hospitals that Jimmy Savile used to infest back then although we saw very little of him. I knew of him as a disc jockey, of course, and we heard one or two odd stories about him, but I paid very little attention at the time. He wasn't really on my radar. In any case, our attachment took place around the time of an ambulance strike which made the A & E department a little more hectic than it usually would be but we didn't get involved and nobody asked us to go out driving.

Back in 1979 Leeds could be a rough old place and we saw plenty of action there. We dressed as doctors: shirt and tie; neat trousers and polished shoes; white coat and stethoscope, but I've got to say that 'Love' and 'Hate' tattooed on John's knuckles did look a little unusual. We got involved in dealing with all kinds of stuff under careful supervision: intubation; broken arms, legs and fingers; pregnant women; scalds; lacerations; dead bodies; everything really.

One benefit of our presence was that when the drunks came in late at night and were kicking off at the doctors and nurses, we could take them somewhere quiet and show them the error of their ways. I suppose I'd been in the army for about 14 years by then and was used to a more or less disciplined, respectful environment and it amazed me to hear the drunken, foul-mouthed abuse being dished out by these louts at people who were trying to help them. Our presence gave the doctors a bit of peace and quiet to get on with their work and they appreciated it. Once they had seen that we were competent, we were accepted as members of the team and got along

fine.

The hospital attachment flew by and once we were back in Hereford, I was really keen to get out into a patrol and put my skills into practice. I didn't have long to wait. A few months later we were on exercise in Brunei, patrolling through the nice clean jungle out there. Although it was easier to move through, the Bruneian jungle was similar enough to Belize: hot and humid with plenty of rain and thunder by night, and just as exhausting. We were practising an 'advance to contact' along a riverbed with the idea being that we would come under fire, then return the fire and manoeuvre as a team back to our last RV point. There were four of us in the patrol: me, DJ, Gerry and David J, our new troop commander. As we came under fire, David had a grenade primed and ready to throw. But as he let go of it, DJ stood up to give covering fire and the grenade hit him smack bang on the back of the head and dropped into the river next to us. I shouted 'Grenade!' and we all dropped down into the mud and water on the riverbank just as the grenade exploded.

At this stage as the smoke cleared, we didn't know if anyone had been injured. DJ stood up with blood streaming down his face and body, literally from head to foot. My first reaction was that he'd taken some of the shrapnel from the grenade as I hadn't seen it hit him on the head. DJ wasn't exactly in shock yet but he knew he was in trouble and I spoke with David to tell him we needed to get DJ back to base camp as soon as possible. Mel, who was the DS on this particular serial,* agreed with me. The three of us assisted DJ back to camp, which wasn't too far away, with me trying to stem the bleeding. As you can imagine, soaking wet and covered in mud, DJ looked pretty bad – in fact far worse than it actually was. Once back in camp, Doctor Rusty got to work and soon got him sorted out. The first thing I did was to shave the hair away around the gash on his scalp. The cut was probably an inch and a half long but very deep. I cleaned the wound up, then injected Lignocaine all around it as a local anaesthetic, and then sutured the cut with stitches. Finally, I injected him up the backside with antibiotics to deal with any secondary infection and dressed the wound to keep it clean, and we gave him the rest of the day off to recover. All in all, a neat piece of work and no lasting harm done, but it could have been much nastier and without my training DJ would have been in real trouble. Of course, DJ's head did now look a bit of a mess and as a vain, good-looking sort of chap he wasn't best pleased about it. Naturally, we spent the rest of the exercise taking the piss whenever we could.

* A ‘serial’ is a specific planned event within a training exercise.

There were a couple of other occasions in my SAS career when my medical training helped me to save a life. The first of these also took place in the jungle although this time in Malaya. We were doing a four-man patrol deep in the jungle when Johnny McAleese picked up a bug of some sort. As his condition deteriorated, I realised that he probably had amoebic dysentery but it was night-time by now and there was no way to move him or bring in help. My job for the next 36 hours was to keep him hydrated and to replace the fluids he was losing by continuously shitting. Believe me, the stench was foul but there was nothing to be done about it. I got a drip into John and using the fluid sets we all carried for just this kind of eventuality, I was able to keep him alive until we could get a helicopter in and evacuated him to hospital. John survived and I was able to confirm that he did indeed have an eye tattooed on each cheek of his arse.

The second occasion happened in Nepal some years later when we were on a task training the Nepalese Special Forces. We had to trek from Kathmandu to a base somewhere high up in the mountains where the training would be taking place. Although there were several SAS Patrol Medics in the group we also had a Nepalese Army doctor with us who would be in charge of the medical side of things. After several hours marching, I noticed that one of our guys, Johnnie ‘Two Combs’ Howard, was beginning to fall behind. This struck me as odd: Johnnie was a fit guy and it wasn’t like him at all to be off the pace. I spoke to Scobie who was the senior NCO in charge of the team and told him I was concerned that there was something wrong with John and we stopped to take a look at him. John wasn’t complaining but he was sweating more than usual and his face had gone a nasty grey-green colour. We got a message to the doctor who was up ahead to come back and assess John’s condition but when he’d looked John over, he said he thought he’d maybe picked up a bug or possibly it was something to do with the altitude.

I didn’t agree with this but I didn’t want a shouting match with the doctor so I made my feelings known to Scobie, and he backed me up. The doctor wanted to continue the march and get Johnnie to the base camp; I wanted to get him off the hill and get him to a hospital. The Nepalese team leader came over and we had a heated discussion but eventually it was decided that Scobie would call for a helicopter and that I would go with John to hospital while the rest carried on up to base camp.

Some time later a Nepalese military helicopter showed up and we got John loaded into it. He was feeling pretty bad by now and the plan was to get him to a military hospital somewhere nearby but we hadn't been flying much more than ten minutes when we spotted a heavy snowstorm up ahead. The pilot told me he wouldn't be able to fly through the storm so I asked him to turn us round and take us to a civilian hospital, as John was clearly now in an even worse state than he'd been when we got him on the helicopter.

As we approached the civilian hospital's HLS, I could see an ambulance waiting for us there and we quickly got Johnnie into it and moved him into the hospital. It was a typical third-world hospital, filthy and overcrowded and the room they wanted to put Johnnie in was full of sick, dirty people. I lied and told them Johnnie was a British Army officer and needed a room of his own, so they wheeled an old woman out of a side room and put him in there. It was still filthy but there wasn't a lot I could do about that. I spoke on the phone to a guy at the British Embassy and he fixed me up with some accommodation at a place down the road and hired me an old scrambling type motorbike to get about on.

The doctors at the hospital had examined John and agreed to admit him and told me that I didn't need to hang around as they knew where I was staying and they would call me if they needed me. I went off to get my head down.

Next morning I turned up first thing to find that they'd already taken John's appendix out and he was on the mend. If we hadn't got him off the mountain, he would not have made it.

There was an odd 'side-bar' to this story which occurred to me later on. Johnnie's big mate Andy McNab was on that task with us but he never bothered to come and see Johnnie, even when he had time to do so. Andy was someone I never got to know well, even though we were in the same squadron for seven years, and it struck me that that was the kind of guy he was: it was all about himself. He isn't a bad bloke but not someone I would want to spend a lot of time with.

CHAPTER EIGHT
LEARNING THE ROPES

One of the more enjoyable aspects of serving in the Regiment was that the training was almost always of a very high standard and we got to visit a huge number of interesting places to do it.

Having qualified as a patrol medic, the next course I was sent on was an ‘offensive driving’ qualification. This was only a short course but from what I’d heard it sounded like a lot of fun and I was keen to do it. This turned out to be right. The course was concerned with anti-ambush drills in single and multiple vehicle groupings and a lot of it was about live firing from inside and outside vehicles: a skill that would be very handy in the world of VIP protection where a lot of SAS soldiers work when they finish with the Regiment. Much of it took place at the SAS training area in the Welsh Borders where there is what’s called a 360° range – a range where you can shoot safely in all directions – which was ideal for what we were practising.

This was followed by the close quarter battle instructors course: again, a lot of shooting, much of which was with pistols and short-range weapons like the Heckler and Koch MP5 variants. You see a lot of rubbish in movies and TV but the basic skills are quite straightforward: you need a stable body position which will allow you to point and aim your weapon naturally, and basically you keep shooting – double taps, which are two rounds fired in rapid succession – until your target goes down and is therefore neutralised.

With all the esoteric stuff we did around the world, it was easy to forget that we had a role within NATO and this was practised from time to time as well. On one occasion B Squadron was sent to take part in a big NATO ‘Flintlock’ exercise in Germany in the winter of 1979. The weather then was as cold as I’ve been any time in my life and the initial plan of parachuting in to Germany and picking up the ‘pinkies’* was soon abandoned as the weather was too bad. Instead we flew in to an airfield and were then dispersed throughout Germany in teams with orders to attack various infrastructure targets, mirroring our role in the event of a major war and giving the exercising troops a live and dangerous enemy to defend against. Together

with the pinkies, we also had some old BSA trail-bikes that were still being used in 8 Troop and these would be our principal means of movement during the target attacks. Essentially we would get as close as we could on the bikes, then cover the last half-mile or so by foot, plant our dummy charges on the targets and exfiltrate back to the bikes and take off. Once we were clear, the head shed would let the exercise umpires know what we'd done and they would come in and inspect our charges, making sure we'd used enough 'explosive' and placed it in the right places to destroy the target.

* Pinkies = specially converted long-wheelbase Landrovers used by the SAS as patrol vehicles.

We did this for a couple of weeks but the real fun came after the exercise was over. Major G, who had taken over as Officer Commanding B Squadron from Major T, had been speaking to one of the senior US Army generals in Germany who was commanding the exercise. The general had been talking about his personal security and had confidently told Major G that 'he could not be captured': his driver-bodyguard was so good and his security routines were so effective that nobody could intercept or kidnap him.

This was an important thing at the time. The so-called 'Baader-Meinhof Gang', alias the 'Red Army Faction', a bunch of hard-left student radicals turned terrorists, were still operating at this time and there was a real threat against all senior military figures, not just German ones. They had already launched terrorist attacks against US Army targets so his security did really need to be good.

But claiming that he couldn't be kidnapped was a red rag to a bull as far as Major G was concerned and they made a bet. B Squadron would try to lift him during a particular five-day period. I don't know what the stakes were but I doubt it was very much.

So the task was given to 8 Troop. Valdez was running the troop then – he was probably the best troop staffie I worked with – and we got down to business pretty quickly. The first step was to put a watch on the general's movements. We saw that he would move about in an unmarked civilian car, sometimes with him driving and sometimes with the driver-bodyguard at the wheel. They varied their routes but we soon realised that there was one stretch of road – running through a forest – which he had to take on his way to work whichever other route they took. This was where we would hit them.

We'd all taken a set of civilian clothes with us and this was what we'd be

wearing, along with balaclavas and respirators. Because of the security situation, and the fact that it was an unofficial exercise, we wouldn't take live weapons with us – we didn't want any entanglements with the German police – but we did have some iron bars and CS gas grenades. We also nicked a couple of '*Umleitung*' (diversion) signs.

The plan was simple. We had two civilian cars, one of which would be in front of the general and one following on a few hundred yards behind. We were going to stop the car by pulling a big log across the road just over the brow of a hill where they wouldn't see it until too late. With the car stopped we would smash the windows and throw in the gas, then pull the general out and get him into one of the cars and take him away to our safe house. The clever part was to be using the diversion signs to prevent any random civilian cars from showing up and getting in the way, or, worse, reporting us.

And that was how it played. My role was to hide in the bushes by the log and to be ready to smash windows and throw in a gas grenade, together with Gonzo, Mink, Gerry, Tak and Valdez. Sure enough, we soon got word that the general was on his way and not long afterwards we saw him heading up the hill. We pulled the log into position and as the driver came over the brow he saw it too late, tried to stop, lost control and ploughed right into it. We moved fast, swinging iron bars and car jacks to smash the windows and get the gas in. The driver came out first, shouting and crying that he was blinded – he wasn't going to be a problem – but the general was a huge fucker, six foot six and strong with it, and he came out fighting. We grappled with him for few seconds – he managed to rip the sleeve off my nice warm civilian padded jacket – but we quickly got a bag over his head and shoved both of them into our vehicles and took off for the safe house. We didn't speak to him or say who we were but I imagine he guessed. Once he was bagged the struggle was over and he came quietly, helped by the plasticuffs we'd got on his wrists. At the safe house we left the general on a chair while we got Major G over and then it was time for the big reveal. To give him his due, the general took it well and there were no comebacks, even though his car was smashed up and one of ours had got damaged too. I doubt we would get away with that kind of thing nowadays. The only annoyance was losing the sleeve on my jacket: I put in a claim for a new one but got fucked off at the high port.

Around about this time I managed to get myself on the demolition instructors course. Just like a little kid I really fancied the idea of learning

how to blow things up and then teaching people how to do it and I thought it would be a good fun course to get under my belt. It wasn't just standard demolitions either. The course included quite a bit about making our own explosives, from easy to obtain household materials, and a fairly hefty section on arson too. It can't be bad to be paid to learn how to burn things down!

To my surprise, there was an awful lot more theoretical study on this course than I had expected and almost every other day, work would start with a test on what we'd learned the day before, so I had to study hard to keep up. Safety rules were paramount. They weren't going to let us loose with explosives and detonators until we knew exactly what we were doing, so I knuckled down and learned everything parrot-fashion.

I soon learned that this was one course where you couldn't afford to fuck about. Something as simple as a detonator going off in your hand would lead at best to a loss of fingers and at worst the whole hand coming off and that was not on my agenda.

The key with the explosives training was calculating exactly how much plastic explosive you need to destroy a given target, and clearly this would vary with what it was made from and where you placed the explosives. The message from the instructors was simple, if in doubt, give it P for plenty; it was better to be slightly over the top than under with plastic explosives.

The home-made explosives part of the course was also fascinating. We learned several different formulas and put them to the test by blowing up tree stumps out on the training area. We also learned how to make improvised claymore* devices using mortar rounds, detonating cord, detonators and a means of initiation. The arson part of the course was also fun and I wondered just how much damage I could do now with my professional knowledge of how to burn stuff down.

* A claymore mine is a mine designed to send fragmentation in a specific direction.

The final exercise took place down at the ranges at Hythe on the coast in Kent. There we were let loose on all kinds of targets using a range of different explosives to take down buildings, cut railway lines, flatten trees and so on. Our final trick was to get rid of all the left over explosive. We placed it under an old tank that was used as a target out on the ranges and managed to turn it over. Not bad at all.

I didn't get a lot of opportunity to use my demolition skills for real but a few years down the line there was a call for a couple of volunteers to go to St

Peter Port in Guernsey to help with the demolition of an old World War II bunker. I decided to go along with Bob P from A Squadron. We got one of the Counter Terrorist (CT) Team white Range Rovers and took the ferry out to Guernsey and met up with a guy called Sidney, who was a civilian demolition expert of great standing and a bit of an explosives guru.

Sidney had been there for several days already but the sheer hard work of demolishing the huge German bunker was too much for him and he needed a couple of young fit guys to help out. Sidney was no spring chicken but Bob and I were keen to learn at the feet of the master and we were up for it.

By the time we got there, Sidney had done all the calculations and our job was mostly drilling the holes that the explosives would go into. With that done, we set up a 'ring main' of detonating cord and then placed sheets of rubber matting over the top of the bunker which would prevent fragments from being launched towards a nearby housing estate. Finally, we inserted the plastic explosive into the holes and connected the initiation set.

We were a fair way away from the bunker for safety reasons but when Sidney – the 'silver fox' as we called him – gave the order to fire it was clear that something was wrong. There was a gigantic bang and we watched in disbelief as huge lumps of concrete were launched into the air. Some of it crashed down onto a road, some landed very close to us and a fair amount ended up in the playground of a nearby school. *Whoops*.

Within a couple of minutes we were surrounded by angry residents, pointing their fingers and generally giving us a hard time. Sidney was trying to work out what had gone wrong and asked us to deal with the residents and we tried to, but it wasn't long before the police turned up and took over. We explained who we were and what we were doing but they weren't that interested and gave us the Gypsy's warning to be out of Guernsey the next morning and not to come back. Sidney too.

We arrived back in Hereford and went to see the operations officer for a debrief. The Regiment had obviously had an angry phone call or two from the Guernsey Police but the ops officer wasn't too worried; we'd been asked to go out there to do the donkey work so it clearly wasn't our fault that Sidney's own 'P for Plenty' was a bit over the top.

One weird thing that the ops officer told us was that the Guernsey Police had been keeping us under surveillance while we were there. We'd seen this but had just got on with the job at hand and hadn't worried about it, although it did seem a little strange. I can't imagine who they thought we were: after

all, we were in an SAS vehicle and they'd surely checked the number plates?

Soon after I did my demolitions course, B Squadron went out to Canada for a big exercise hosted by the Canadian Special Forces who were based in Edmonton. The exercise would be split into several phases, starting with troop training, so that 6 Troop would do an amphibious exercise, 7 Troop would go free-falling, we would do mobility training using our pinkies and the new Can-Am motorcycles we were trialling for the Regiment and 9 Troop would be climbing in the Rockies.

We flew out there and had a day or so to shake out before we headed off for our troop training. We had all the pinkies with us, together with a couple of guys driving a 'mother ship' truck and the rest of us on the Can-Am motorbikes. We'd also brought a qualified testing officer (QTO) with us, a senior NCO from the Royal Corps of Transport called Alan, who was there to assess and test all the guys who didn't have their motorcycle licences and was attached to us for the duration of the exercise.

Alan made the mistake on the first day of turning up in a motorcycle helmet with 'Instructor' printed on it. Within minutes, all the trainees had strips of masking tape with 'Student 1', 'Student 2' etcetera written on them. Alan got the message very quickly and removed the 'Instructor' strip, and moments later, the 'Student 1', 'Student 2' signs had gone as well.

The plan was to drive out to the huge training area at Wainwright and then, because we were self-sufficient thanks to the vehicles and their stores, we would move around, basha-ing up wherever we ended up at the end of the day's training.

It was late when we got to Wainwright and we decided to go to a civilian campsite for the night. We got there and started to sort ourselves out and a few of the lads got chatting with some Canadians who were also there. It soon emerged that there was a big strike on in Canada at the time and this had led to a shortage of beer as it wasn't being distributed round the country. It so happened that we had quite a large amount in the mother ship which we'd bought at the Canadian NAAFI in Edmonton so Valdez, the Fijian staff sergeant who was running 8 Troop, cut a deal: the Canadians would supply the barbecue and we would supply the beer. It was something we did several times over the next few weeks and nobody complained on either side.

Next morning we got on to the training area proper and began our motorcycle training. Alan the QTO decided that the best thing would be to spend the day playing 'follow the leader' with him up front. To be fair, he

was a pretty good motorcyclist but we were a mixed bag: some guys were fine, others not so much. The terrain was rough and hilly, with thick bushes and trees, plenty of sandy areas and also a lot of trenches and foxholes which had been dug by troops on exercise and not filled in. ‘Follow the leader’ was fine for a couple of hours but then began to get boring and the guys were beginning to fuck around like a bunch of kids. This wasn’t supposed to be a tactical exercise at this point; we were just getting to know the bikes, which had been originally designed for motocross.

As it happens the bikes were OK, but perhaps a little complicated, and, as we found, spares were in short supply. Even so, we were able to have some fun on them and soon we were disappearing in all directions as we put them through their paces. Alan found a comfy place to sit and watch, wondering, I suspect, how we didn’t manage to seriously injure ourselves. The next couple of days were really more of the same but we did start to rack up the injuries. George S managed to hit a foxhole lengthways at speed: the bike stopped dead and he was thrown over the handlebars, dislocating his thumbs so they stuck out like Fonzie’s from *Happy Days* and he spent most of the rest of the exercise confined to one of the pinkies.

One feature of Wainwright was that it had the biggest mosquitoes I think I’ve ever seen. As soon as you came off your bike, they’d be all over you, biting away.

After a couple of weeks at Wainwright we headed back to Edmonton for a break and to regroup as a squadron. The Canadian Special Forces had challenged us to a football match and for some reason thought they were going to win. Wrong. We gave them a thorough thrashing and then took them on in some competitive drinking which was a bit closer.

This is important. SAS soldiers are given a lot of responsibility but the second you demonstrate that you aren’t worthy of it, you’re in trouble as this story demonstrates.

Some time in the early 1980s, an annual exercise programme was developed with the US Delta Force, which was known to us as a ‘Deltex’. At that time, it was basically a hard core ‘escape and evasion’ (‘E & E’) exercise in which an SAS squadron would go over to the US to act as evaders whilst being hunted by Delta; and the reverse the next year with a Delta Squadron coming over to the UK to be hunted down by us.

I really enjoyed this kind of training because it was so realistic, and therefore genuinely testing. I knew people then who would have paid to take

part in it. It was an opportunity to give full rein to our fitness and guile; left to our own devices but working within the regimental Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). It was a bit like a ramped-up version of the E & E we'd all done on selection: moving cross country in our patrols, meeting contacts to be passed from grid reference to grid reference. The big difference was that if you managed to stay out of the clutches of the hunter force – which was problematic as Delta Force are extremely sharp operators – then you didn't get interrogated. Of course, if you were captured, it was the same drill: name, rank, number and date of birth; and nothing else whatsoever.

I missed one of the B Squadron Deltexes in 1983 because I was working in the CRW Wing – sadly I couldn't be in two places at once – but on the squadron's return, it was clear that all was not well. It quickly emerged that one of the Mountain Troop patrols had been caught, almost literally, with their pants down. For some reason, perhaps over-confidence or that they were simply not taking the exercise seriously enough, they'd been caught by Delta, in a 'lie-up' in their sleeping bags, with their socks and personal kit hanging up to dry on the bushes. There was no way they were getting away from that.

There were four of them in the patrol: a captain, a corporal, a lance corporal and a newly-badged trooper, and the captain, the corporal and the lance corporal were all immediately Returned to Unit, never to serve again in the SAS. The trooper was let off with a warning: as the new kid on the block it was accepted that he'd been led astray by his seniors and didn't have a real say in what they did.

This was embarrassing for both the squadron and the Regiment but it was a lesson for all of us: you can never afford to fuck around no matter how senior you are! In my entire fifteen years in the SAS, this was the only time I can think of that three members of a four-man patrol had ever been RTU'd together. You do your job as you've been taught it and you don't cut corners. The SAS takes this seriously: during my time with the Regiment, the squadron sergeant majors of all four squadrons – A, B, D and G – were all removed from their posts at one time or another. So once you've earned that trust, you've still got to work hard to keep it.

The next phase of the exercise was a combination of adventure training and fitness, involving some hard walking in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. We hadn't been there long when we saw our first bear, an absolutely huge grizzly which had wandered in between two of our groups of walkers. Brad, Mink and a couple of others were about 300–400 yards ahead

of my group and hadn't spotted it but we reckoned that if we spread out and started heading towards it, it would take off in their direction and that definitely had a few comedy possibilities. Sure enough, as we went towards the bear it took off at a lolloping run in the direction of the front group. None of them looked around for a while and when they eventually did, it was to see this massive beast bearing down on them. Not surprisingly, the mighty SAS warriors had a collective panic attack and bomb-burst in all directions while we all got a good laugh.

With the adventure training over we headed back to Edmonton for a wash-up and a final piss-up with the Canadians to thank them for their hospitality, then it was back to the UK. As usual, we got a few days' R & R to wind down before our flight. I decided to stay in Edmonton with a couple of others, but a few lads headed down to Calgary and went from there to an Indian reservation where one – a corporal who had better remain nameless – managed to return late having got very friendly indeed with one of the squaws.

I'd been in the Regiment three years now and at some point, which nobody ever tells you, I'd got past the probationary period and was a fully accepted member of the SAS. Of course, there's always a chance that you will fuck up and get RTU'd but there comes a point when they're no longer watching for you to do so. I suppose it's a question of trust.

What this meant for me was that I would be selected for team jobs, training our overseas allies and the first one I got sent on, in 1980, was to go to Sri Lanka to work with their newly formed counter-terrorist unit.

This is one of the tasks that the SAS do which looks, on the face of it, like military assistance but is really an aspect of British 'soft power'. We generate a lot of good will by imparting useful skills and drills to foreign military units, we help to spread British influence by teaching them to operate as 'democratic' and accountable forces, and sometimes, when the countries in question can afford to pay for the training, like some of the Middle Eastern states, we bring in a sizeable amount of cash too.

The Sri Lankans needed our help because of their growing problem with the so-called 'Tamil Tigers', a terrorist group which was seeking liberation for the sizeable Tamil minority within Sri Lanka and which were supposedly being covertly supported by the government of India.

The training was all going to take place within Sri Lanka itself and we were given two months to get it done. The job was to teach them hostage

rescue, and as part of their preparation they'd built a 'killing house' and mocked up an aircraft fuselage at their Special Forces base on the jungle fringes outside Colombo.

We flew out and met the guys we were going to train. They were good people but not naturally aggressive and I could see that being a problem. To work well in an anti-terrorist role, you need a lot of controlled aggression if you're going to get the job done and I was concerned they didn't have it.

What makes a good assault team member? We use the acronym 'SAS', standing in this case for Speed, Aggression, Surprise, combined with controlled firepower and a thinking brain. The guys we were training had all the kit, but it was our job to teach them to make the best use of it.

For the training, we broke them down into three groups. The two main elements were the assaulters and the snipers, but additionally they needed a 'head shed' control group which would consist of their commander, a communications specialist, a 'sergeant major' and an operations sergeant; and they needed to be taught how to run it all.

Having identified who was to be in each group, we divided them up and got to work. The sniper group went with half of our instructors to do their thing, while I ran the team training the assaulters. One of the senior NCOs from the squadron decided that we would operate a 'round robin' training cycle. Thus one group would be doing, for example, dry training with the HK MP5 sub-machine gun and its variants; one group would be on a 5–10-metre range shooting pistols and MP5s; and one group would be working in the killing house, practising room scenarios with single and, later, multiple targets. This was to take place over several weeks as we developed their confidence and skills. One of the most important elements is safety. You can't do this kind of thing if you're worried that the man behind might shoot you and we had to teach them to be aware and weapon conscious at all times.

Not long into the training there was an accident that could probably have been avoided. One of the guys we were training was tasked to move some targets from the range we were using to the killing house and consequently missed having his weapon cleared by the instructors. The guy who'd been moving the targets came back to the safe area at the range and joined the others who were stripping and cleaning their pistols. He sat down to start cleaning his weapon but for some reason completely forgot his basic drills, pulled the working parts of the weapon back with a magazine still inserted, and then let them go whilst he still had a finger on the trigger. Sod's law was

that there was still a round in the magazine and he shot the guy sitting next to him in the head.

Not surprisingly, panic ensued, and there were a number of bent and damaged needles littering the ground before I and the Sri Lankan doctor at the scene managed to get intravenous drips into the wounded man whose veins were rapidly collapsing. He was still alive when the casualty evacuation (casevac) helicopter took him to the hospital, but by the time a doctor got to see him there – and there was some delay at the hospital for unexplained reasons – he had died.

The guy who pulled the trigger was taken off the team but, not surprisingly, morale took a nose dive. I talked to them about individual and team safety, explaining that it certainly wasn't the first time that something like this had happened and it was unlikely to be the last. We needed a break and having chatted amongst ourselves, decided to take them all for a run to break the atmosphere. This seemed to work and they soon knuckled back down to the training.

In the weeks following the accidental shooting everything went well and there were no more serious injuries. As their shooting skills improved, we began to integrate the training into exercise scenarios, bringing together the assaulters, snipers and head shed groups so that each could play their role in the various different options we were teaching them. These included things like building assault and clearance; aircraft assaults; bus assaults; dealing with booby traps; what to do with hostages after an incident; and a range of other procedures which all go together to give a comprehensive ability to deal with most conceivable terrorist incidents.

From my point of view, the assault team reached a pretty high standard and the instructors with the snipers and head shed were very satisfied with the standard that their guys were reaching as well. From what we could see the Sri Lankans had faced up to the challenge we had set them and done themselves proud. They'd developed from a group of individuals with varying levels of training and skill into a well-integrated team capable of dealing with anything we could throw at them which, after all, was the aim of it all.

When we'd finished the training, we got a visit from the Sri Lankan top brass who watched a demonstration of the team's capabilities and pronounced themselves well satisfied: so much so, in fact, that we were given a couple of days off, all expenses paid, in a smart hotel in Colombo where we

could let our hair down and go and see the sights. All in all, it was a very satisfying experience.

CHAPTER NINE

FIRST BLOOD

The Iranian Embassy

On Wednesday 30 April 1980 I was sitting at home in Hereford waiting for a phone call. B Squadron had recently taken over from D Squadron as the 22 SAS on-call counter-terrorist team and having finished our work-up training, we were due to conduct an exercise in Northumbria at some point over the coming Bank Holiday weekend. I'd been in the SAS for nearly three years by now and had reached the dizzy heights of lance corporal and I was now designated as one of the 'Blue Team' assaulters so I should have been feeling fairly pleased with myself, but I wasn't.

Gripe number one was with the whole idea of an exercise over the Bank Holiday when most sensible people would be celebrating the arrival of spring with barbecues and beer drinking. Gripe number two was more specific. I was due to play for Westfields Football Club in a cup final on Bank Holiday Monday and I had absolutely no idea whether I would be back from the exercise in time to play.

I had made myself a cup of Nescafé and was sipping it as I read the morning paper when the phone rang. Here we go, I thought.

I picked up the receiver to answer it.

'Rusty?' It was 'Wing-Nut', the squadron clerk.

'Yes, speaking.'

'You need to come into camp straight away for briefing.'

'On my way,' I told him. As I was talking, the bleeper I wore on my belt went off, signalling a message. This was normal: we were on 30 minutes standby so I was entitled to be at home, which was less than 500 yards from camp, but I might have been in the garden or sitting on the bog when the phone rang so they would bleep the whole team at the same time as they were calling round. It was a routine Standard Operating Procedure (SOP).

I glanced down at the little LCD screen on the bleeper and was surprised to

see that it read ‘9999’ which was the code for a live operation, rather than ‘1111’ which signalled the start of an exercise. *Someone’s getting over-excited*, I thought.

My overnight kit was already packed in a bag by the front door so I picked it up, went out, locking the door behind me, and jogged down to camp. I was in no particular hurry as I assumed that it was just the start of the exercise and that the operational code was a mistake but I was still there within six or seven minutes of the call going out.

I arrived on camp at about the same time as Gerry, Minky and Johnny Mac and we hung around, chatting about this and that, waiting for the rest of the squadron to arrive. By now we’d picked up on the rumour that there was actually a live incident going on in London and it seemed likely that the planned exercise was binned, or at least postponed, until the head shed found out what was happening.

With most of the team assembled, Officer Commanding B Squadron, Major G, gave us a quick briefing. He confirmed that there was an incident taking place at the Iranian Embassy in London and that the exercise was off for the time being until we knew what was going on and whether we were likely to be involved. As was usual, all of our operational kit was already packed and ready to go, so there wasn’t any real preparation for us to do and it became the usual army game of ‘hurry up and wait’, sitting around drinking coffee and shooting the shit with each other.

Some time after the briefing it was confirmed that the exercise was definitely cancelled and I thought: *Great! With any luck we have a live operation* and *I get to play in the cup final on Monday*.

Mid-afternoon the squadron headquarters team began their move down to London and we were briefed that we would be following them down later on. We basically had two options for this. The first was a fast road move as a squadron with a police escort. That would get us to London quickly – probably in about two hours – but it would attract a lot of unwanted attention. The second option was for the squadron to quietly move down in small packets of two or three vehicles which would most likely go unnoticed. That was the option the head shed went for.

The plan was that our fleet of Range Rovers, transit vans and the pantechnicon with the heavy kit would leave quietly in twos and threes and head for an RV at the Army School of Languages just off the M40 at Beaconsfield on the outskirts of London. There we would get a meal and an

update briefing, and then carry on into town in the same inconspicuous manner.

By now we had an idea about what was going on from listening to the news on the radio. It appeared that a group of apparently armed men had attacked the Iranian Embassy on Prince's Gate, next to Hyde Park, and were holding hostages, thought to include several Brits. From our point of view, it sounded promising: something for us to get our teeth into.

We started setting off at about 7.30pm and took the drive down to Beaconsfield at a steady pace. Stu McVicar was in the lead Range Rover and as we crossed into each new police area, he updated their area controller on the police radio which every vehicle was fitted with.

We arrived at Beaconsfield a bit after 10pm and, once we were all there, headed for the cookhouse. There we hit a snag. Although they'd been told we were coming, the duty slop jockey* had knocked off and gone off to get pissed in the sergeants' mess. He was eventually tracked down and summoned to the kitchen but when he arrived he was belligerent and aggressive and hadn't got a clue who this odd bunch of blokes with long hair and droopy moustaches were. He certainly wasn't going to cook for us.

* Slop jockey = Army chef

Tak asked him politely again, telling him that we were on an operation and needed to be fed but he wasn't having it. Things seemed to have reached an impasse until a couple of the lads hopped over the counter, grabbed him by his arms and held his hands down on the hotplate. It wasn't hot enough to do any damage but it concentrated his mind and he sulkily got down to making some food.

Once we were all fed and watered, we got an update brief. We were told that at about 11.30am the Iranian Embassy had been taken over by armed men and hostages had been taken. For the time being we would move forwards to a holding area at Regent's Park Barracks (RPB), about three miles by road from the Embassy, where we would be on call to assist the Metropolitan Police who were currently dealing with the situation. If it escalated and the police were unable to control it, we would be called in to mount a military option.

That was fair enough: it was exactly what we were trained to do. With the briefing over, we resumed our move down to London, still travelling in the same quiet, covert manner, making as little fuss as possible and by the early

hours of the morning we were all in place at RPB and the vehicles were parked up. As far as we could tell, there had been no compromise.

Once we were all at RPB, the process was set in motion to move Red Team to another holding area closer to the Embassy, in this case at 14 and 15 Prince's Gate, the headquarters of the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP). As the counter-terrorist (or 'special projects') team, we had a full squadron, and were able to break it down into two sub-teams – Red and Blue – each with an assault and sniper capability, as well as the headquarters group focused on the officer commanding, Major G. This meant that there would always be a reasonably fresh, fully equipped team ready to go at short notice if something unexpected happened, while both teams would combine for a deliberate option if it came to it. Red Team were the first to move forwards as they were there complete, while Blue Team, which I was in, had several personnel away on team jobs so we'd had to draft in members of A and D Squadrons to fill the gaps.

Once Red Team were in position, they would quickly put together an 'immediate action' (IA) plan which would be a rough and ready assault if it all kicked off. We had little illusion that if either team did have to go in, more or less blind, at this stage of the operation, it was likely to be bloody but that was what we were there for.

Blue Team had to wait 24 hours before we could follow Red to the RCGP and it was an agonising period, hoping that nothing would happen before we got there. There wasn't much we could do other than sit around and check and re-check our weapons and equipment.

As the day wore on, we began to get a little bit of information about who the terrorists were. It seemed they were Iranians of Arabic extraction who came from a province in the south-west of Iran which the Iranians called 'Khuzestan' and they claimed as 'Arabistan'. It seemed likely that they were being supported, one way or another, by the Iraqi government, which quite fancied getting its hands on this particular bit of oil-rich semi-desert.

In the early hours of Friday morning we followed Red Team down to the RCGP, moving in various different police and civilian vehicles. All I had with me was the civilian clothes I was standing up in, a sleeping bag and my ops bag, which contained my weapons and ammunition, S6 respirator, black Royal Tank Regiment coveralls, Bristol body armour and ceramic plates, boots, balaclava, leather pilots' gloves and my washing and shaving kit. Red Team had been covering the IA for the past 24 hours and now we could take

over while they got some rest. It was decided at this stage that we would work 12-hour shifts between the two teams so that everyone got a chance to rest and wind down a little but, for the time being, we would all stay where we were, practically next door to the Embassy. The terrorists didn't know it but the neighbours from hell were right next to them.

Once we were in place, I changed into my ops kit and that was what I would live in until the operation was over, one way or another, with my MP5 and 9mm Browning Hi Power pistol and all my ammunition with me at all times. If something happened it would inevitably be at short notice and there wouldn't be time to fuck around.

The Red Team commander, a Fijian staff sergeant, gave us a quick brief on the IA plan and then it became our responsibility. We would have to start putting some meat on the bones. Right now, information on what was going on in the Embassy was sketchy but in the coming days, if it lasted that long, we could expect to build up a much better picture of what and who we were dealing with. This would come from our snipers and the police snipers, who were watching the outside of the building intently; from any hostages who were released and debriefed; from the police negotiators who were already establishing contact with the terrorists; and the spooks who had set up next door in the Ethiopian Embassy and who were already beginning the process of setting up technical surveillance measures. All of this information would be passed to our intelligence cell who would analyse it and strip out anything of relevance that we needed to know and pass it on to us.

The IA at this stage was pretty simple: if they started killing hostages we would race to the front of the Embassy, smash down the door with sledgehammers and shotguns, take out as many windows as possible and go in with all guns blazing; simultaneously we would put scaling ladders up the front of the Embassy to get to the windows on the first and second floors, while other members of the team crossed the rooftops and broke in from above, fighting their way down by any means possible. What we didn't know at this stage was that the front windows on the lower storeys had armoured glass fitted as an anti-terrorist measure and getting through this would be seriously problematic.

Our big focus was on identifying the terrorists themselves. We needed descriptions of them and what they were wearing; we needed to know how many of them there were; we needed to know what weapons and ammunition they had; and we needed to know where in the Embassy they were. We did

know that the Embassy was a large, six-storey building including the basement and that there would be a total of 54 rooms to clear once we got in there. We also needed to know about the hostages: who they were and what they were wearing, and where they were being held. As this information began to trickle in and we gained increasing clarity about the situation, we were able to refine and update the IA and thus improve the possibility of success if we did have to storm the building at short notice.

Typically, the terrorists began to impose deadlines to try to exert pressure to get their demands met and every time a deadline approached, we would 'stand to' the IA until it had passed and nothing had happened.

We used the time on standby to try to get some sleep and I was in a semi-doze, hot and uncomfortable in my ops kit and body armour, when I realised someone was gently shaking me awake. I opened my eyes to see David J and Roy who was second-in-command of Blue Team.

'Rusty, we need a quick word,' Roy told me.

I unzipped my sleeping bag and got out to follow them into the next room so we wouldn't disturb the other sleepers.

'Rusty, I'm going to be building and setting the distraction charge with Frank Collins and a couple of other lads,' Roy told me, 'so we have to re-jig everything. I want you to move up and take over as third-in-command Blue Team, so you'll be leading the guys in from the back of the Embassy to clear the basement and ground floors.'

This was a real surprise. I was a lance corporal with three years under my belt and there were plenty of more experienced men there but that's how the SAS works. Rank is not that important, trust, respect and aptitude are. Roy handed me several pages of notes he'd written with details of groupings, timings and callsigns on them. I had a quick look through them and told him, 'Thanks for the heads-up; I'm up for it.'

He patted me on the shoulder and I went back to my pit but there was no way I could sleep straight away, with my mind whirling with thoughts about this added responsibility. I looked around the room at the lads crashed out snoring on the floor and couldn't imagine how we could possibly fail.

When morning came I'd managed a little sleep and some of the others had clearly been as restless as I had: they were up and about already. The first incident of the day came at about 11.30am. Salim, the leader of the terrorists, was becoming increasingly angry. He had given the police a statement he wanted the BBC to broadcast but, as yet, it hadn't gone out on air. He took

Trevor Lock, the Met policeman who'd been guarding the Embassy, to the so-called talking window, along with a couple of other hostages, and began ranting and raving at the negotiators outside. He was demanding that Arab ambassadors be brought to the Embassy and that the police should guarantee safe passage for his group and the Iranian hostages out of the country. While this was going on, all of us in the holding area were on full alert. It was clear that Salim was tired and was in danger of losing control and that made him dangerous; it looked to us as if it was only a matter of time before he started to kill to get his way.

As the day wore on, more deadlines came and went for different reasons, and each time we stood the IA to in case something happened. At some point, the negotiators told Salim that if he didn't harm the hostages, then we wouldn't take direct action to free them and this seemed to cheer him up and relax the tension. When Blue Team's shift ended in mid-afternoon, we quickly changed into our civvies and headed back to RPB where we were to begin our preparations for a deliberate stronghold assault.

While we'd been at Prince's Gate, the pioneer platoon of the Irish Guards had got to work building a slightly scaled down replica of each floor of the Embassy out of wood and hessian in the big gymnasium at RPB. This meant that we could rehearse a clearance operation in our teams and would be familiar with the layout once we got inside. In addition to doing a stronghold assault, we had two other options to work on. One of these was a sniper option, to take out the terrorists at long range, and the second was an open-air option, in case the terrorists were moved in a bus to the airport. Consequently, in my new role as a team leader, there was a whole lot more to think about.

The sniper option was my least favoured method. It could work but it was difficult to guarantee that we could take out all or most of the terrorists before they did serious harm to the hostages. The stronghold option, storming the Embassy building itself, was also problematic as we knew that the terrorists had had a chance to fortify it and were well armed with submachine guns, pistols and grenades. The bus option could work well if we could do it with enough speed. To help rehearse this, we got a coach parked at RPB and went to work. The plan was, if possible, to get Gonzo there as the driver. He would be going in bare-arsed: no weapon or body armour and actually dressed as a copper: we even got him a haircut so he could get the police peaked cap on. Gonzo is a thin, wiry guy, an ex-Para with a penchant for roll-up fags, and in

his blue police uniform, he looked like a varicose vein.

We would need to stop the coach, gain entry and then clear it at speed using maximum flash-bangs, CS gas and firepower if it wasn't all to go horribly wrong. In training we reckoned we could gain entry to the coach in about three seconds; then I would get between Gonzo and the terrorists, acting as a human shield, while he clambered out through a side window at the same time as Gerry, Mink, Pete 'Snapper' Winner – a veteran of the battle of Mirbat – and the rest boarded, working their way from the front to the back, taking the hostages out and getting them ID'd and cuffed outside. The terrorists would be dealt with accordingly as we found them: the mission was to rescue the hostages.

In training we could get this done in 60 seconds from start to finish, but in training nobody is shooting back at you. Still, it was the basis of a plan we could develop and we had the right guys to do it.

While we had been working at RPB, the situation in the Embassy had improved. The BBC World Service had broadcast Salim's demands verbatim and, in return, Salim had released two of the hostages: a pregnant woman and an older man who was a heavy snorer and was keeping them all awake at night. The terrorists saw the broadcast as a sign of success and were now in a good mood and we'd been able to stand down the IA for the time being.

We returned to Prince's Gate to begin our next shift on standby. As team leader my job now was to get myself fully briefed on the situation so I could fill the lads in before we took over from Red Team again. The rehearsals at RPB had given us more confidence and I felt, after countless repetitions in the mock-up at the gym, that I could happily walk round the Embassy blindfolded. Around 11pm, Snapper, Roy and a couple of other guys did a recce over the rooftops to see if they could find a guaranteed entry point into the Embassy. They found a skylight above a bathroom which they reckoned opened onto the main landing on the top floor. It was locked from the inside but Snapper carefully worked at the lead and was eventually able to open it. Resisting the temptation to go inside, they returned to brief Major G, knowing we had a definite way in.

Sunday was a typical quiet sunny day in the heart of London. The terrorists were still in a good mood as a result of the broadcast and were cheered up that the Arab ambassadors they had asked to act as intermediaries had shown a willingness to do so. The police were keen to keep this mellow mood going for as long as possible. Through the day, Blue and Red Teams alternated back

at RPB rehearsing the options we had developed and I was confident that however it panned out, we would be able to deal with anything they threw at us.

The World Snooker Final was being played out in Sheffield and any down-time there was, I spent watching Alex Higgins, my favourite player, as he attempted to win it for the first time. It seemed to me that the terrorists must be pretty shattered by now and if one of them was to make a mistake, like accidentally shooting a hostage, everything could change very quickly. We knew by now that there were disagreements between the terrorists and in their fragile state it could all escalate very quickly. An added problem was that one of the hostages, Mustapha Kharkouti, was sick and had not responded to the drugs that were sent in for him and we didn't know how Salim would deal with this. To everyone's surprise, Salim decided to let him go.

Kharkouti came out of the Embassy at 8.20pm and was quickly taken away for a debrief. He was able to reveal that everyone in the building was in a very shaky state and that the terrorists were getting increasingly angry at the failure of the Arab ambassadors to appear. In reality, while they had agreed to help, they weren't prepared to co-operate with the police plan to simply keep the terrorists talking until they gave up: either they would be taking part in real negotiations or they wouldn't play ball. He also told the police about tension between the terrorists and some of the Embassy staff who were hard-line Khomeini supporters which had already led to one dangerous flare up during the afternoon. Critically, Kharkouti was able to confirm that none of the Embassy staff were involved with the terrorists and, as we had pictures of all of them, that would make identifying the terrorists a whole lot easier when the shit hit the fan.

Meanwhile we continued with preparation. Part of this focused on learning the faces of all of the hostages and of the terrorists, although the terrorist pictures were simple black and white photofits. Personally I focused on the terrorists but everyone does it in their own way. We now knew there were six terrorists and 19 hostages still in the Embassy and I reckoned learning six faces would be easier.

Late on Sunday evening we learned that Salim was getting worried by sounds coming from the walls of the building. Trevor Lock tried to tell him it was mice but Salim didn't believe him and he was right: it was yet more surveillance equipment being inserted by the spooks. 'Poison Dwarf ', the squadron sergeant major, told me then that COBRA, the government

committee established to manage the crisis, would be meeting through the night to discuss tactics for the following day as it looked as if negotiations had reached a stalemate. I chatted with the lads for a bit before trying to rest and was relieved to see they were in their usual good humour with plenty of piss-taking going on. By now they were as ready as they would ever be to go in and rescue the hostages and we were keen to do it, but it remained a police-led operation and we were still just the back-up plan.

Bank Holiday Monday was day six of the siege and I knew for sure by then that I wouldn't be playing in the cup final for Westfields FC at Kidderminster. Still, that was the least of my worries and I began to think about moving the lads over to RPB to get on with some more rehearsals. I was beginning to get this jacked up when the squadron sergeant major came over and told me to put it on hold: he wanted both Red and Blue Teams at Prince's Gate for the time being.

At about 11am, Trevor Lock shouted from one of the windows that the terrorists were going to kill a hostage if there was no movement on getting an Arab ambassador to the Embassy to negotiate within 30 minutes. With both teams there we were ready to go and it looked like it would be the stronghold option, which by then was my least favourite. I still felt that Salim and the terrorists would eventually give up and surrender because they hadn't actually got anywhere apart from making their point about the persecution of ethnic Arabs in Iran. Realistically, what could they hope to achieve? Of course, a terrorist under extreme stress probably isn't rational in the accepted sense and it would be foolish to be too complacent.

Sometime in the early afternoon, three shots were heard from inside the Embassy. This was a bad sign. There was no proof of murder yet but it looked ominous. Some time afterwards, Trevor Lock called on the field telephone which had been given to the terrorists to say that a hostage had been killed and that another would die in 30 or 40 minutes if the terrorists were not guaranteed a free passage out of the UK.

The negotiators got to work and managed to push the deadline back to 5pm and then, a little later, to 7pm. We still had no proof that a murder had occurred – if we had, we'd have gone in earlier – but it was clear we were reaching a crisis point. To punctuate this, Johnny Mac produced a plastic frog which belonged to his baby son Paul* and started making 'ribbit' noises while pulling a string to make its arms and legs flap.

* Paul McAleese was killed by an improvised explosive device (IED) in Sangin, Afghanistan on 29 August 2009 as a serjeant in 2 Rifles. His death broke his father's heart.

Meanwhile, a top-class wind-up was in the offing. Wing-Nut was one of the young squadron clerks attached from the RAOC and working in the squadron headquarters group. Mel told him that we were a man short and needed him in on the assault with us. A set of black coveralls and body armour were found for him and Mel started teaching him room combat drills. Wing-Nut's face was deathly pale but to be fair to him, he was game for it. He got as far as the formal pre-mission orders before Mel told him it was a wind-up.

Now it seemed to be back to 'hurry up and wait'. Everyone was in their black kit and tooled up but we couldn't move until we got the word. We had a TV room at the RCGP and most of us settled down there to watch the snooker and drink tea and coffee. There was an outside line telephone and a queue developed of those who wanted to make a quick call home, but I didn't see any panic or nervousness, just determination to get the job done and the hostages rescued.

In between frames of snooker, I went back to the intelligence briefing area to study the faces of the terrorists on the boards. It was all about focus. The situation inside the Embassy was bad: the terrorists were exhausted, stressed, hungry and probably frightened. We on the other hand were rested, well fed and well rehearsed: we knew exactly what we had to do and we were ready to do it.

A little before 7pm things suddenly changed dramatically. Salim had been in a shouting match with the negotiators but suddenly broke off and three more shots were heard. Not long afterwards, the front door of the Embassy opened and the body of a young man in a yellow cardigan was dumped outside like a garbage bag. Two policemen with a stretcher moved forwards to collect him and saw immediately that it was Abbas Lavasani, a young press attaché who was a fanatical pro-Khomeini supporter and had been arguing with the terrorists. He had been shot in the back of the head some time before and his body was quite cool. This raised the question of whether the last series of shots had signalled the death of another hostage but it was academic really. As soon as we heard the news I realised that the terrorists had crossed the line and we would be going in. It would be the stronghold option.

The plan was in five phases. Phase One would be the deployment of the sniper and assault teams into position ready to go; Phase Two would be the initiation of the distraction charge followed by our entry into the building; Phase Three would be the assault on the stronghold and domination of the building; Phase Four would be the evacuation of the surviving hostages; Phase Five was the post assault procedure.

In the background, the police commander at the scene, John Dellow, was formally handing over control of the situation to the Commanding Officer 22 SAS, but I knew nothing about that until later. What I heard at 7.07pm was Major G coming up on the net:

'All stations, this is Sunray. I have control. Out.'

At this I jumped up from my chair where I was watching the snooker and I started to lead my team towards our final assault position concealed behind a wall at the rear of the Embassy, moving carefully to avoid any chance of being seen and compromised. Outside in the cool, fresh evening air I suddenly realised that I had left my gloves behind in the TV room. *Shit!* Too late to do anything about it now. Somewhere up above us, the Red Team callsigns were crossing the roofs to take up position to enter by the upper floors, and in the next door building, Johnny Mac and Mel were preparing for their explosive entry across the front first floor balcony. Meanwhile, Frank Collins and Roy were carefully lowering a distraction charge of about a pound of PE4 explosive into the light well in the middle of the Embassy.

It took about 16 minutes to get everyone in position and ready to initiate. As soon as we reached our assault position, I reported in that Bravo One and the rest of the Bravo callsigns with me were in position and ready to go, and listening in on the net I could hear the other team leaders doing the same. Suddenly, Major G came up again:

'Go! Go! Go!'

This was followed immediately by a huge explosion as the distraction charge was set off by Frank Collins up on the roof and the whole area seemed to rock as the blast wave rushed past.

Our plan was to blow a frame charge to gain entry through the door at the rear that led into the library but looking up I could see a member of Red Team hung up on an abseil rope not far above us, as flames licked out of a window next to him. It was decision time and I realised that if we initiated the frame charge, we'd probably kill him.

'Pull the dets!' I shouted at Steve and we both began pulling the detonators

from the plastic explosive on the charge and throwing them onto the grass. Bob C had a sledgehammer and I told him to take out the sash window to the side of the door. He swung the hammer and the glass shattered, creating an entry point for all ten of us. We threw in flash-bangs and followed them in, moving fast and aggressively.

After the flash-bangs went off, the room was dark and smoky. We scanned around with the Maglite torches mounted on our MP5s. I saw a black-clad figure standing in front of me, framed by what looked like a window. I realised it was me and I was looking in a mirror. The library was empty, apart from us.

'Room clear!' I shouted.

I opened the door into the stairwell and took a quick look at the scene; it was beginning to fill with smoke and CS gas and all I could hear was the sounds of flash-bangs exploding, gunfire, men shouting and women screaming. My team peeled past to start clearing the ground floor rooms and Snapper led his teams down the stairs to begin clearing out the basement, shooting the locks from doors to gain entry to the rooms. With the ground floor cleared we took position to dominate it, focusing on the stairs down from the first floor which was where any threat was likely to come from. We had yet to see any hostages or terrorists. The command net was now in total chaos as everyone was trying to talk at the same time, including the head shed who should have known better. There was no point in trying to speak: nobody would hear anything I said.

We began to see movement on the first floor as the teams up above started hustling the hostages towards the staircase. They were crying, shouting and coughing up CS and despite our respirators we were also getting whiffs of it.

As the hostages came down the stairs, I was trying to pick out any terrorists who might be hiding amongst them. The hostages were being firmly bundled downstairs, shown at the back door and then quickly moved out into the back garden where the reserve team and the hostage reception guys were. From my place in the stairwell I was in a perfect position to observe exactly what was going on and to maintain command and control over my team.

I heard some shouting from the assaulters up above and looked up to see them pointing at one of the figures stumbling down the stairs. I knew this must mean that they had missed something and were trying to point it out to us. The man coming down was tall, dressed in a green combat-type jacket which he seemed to be holding up to shield his face on his left side facing

towards me. Above his collar I could see a mop of Afro-type hair. All the study of the pictures during the last six days paid off: this was Faisal the bully, second-in-command of the terrorist group and the most aggressive of them all. I spun him round to face me by grabbing his left hand as he tried to go past.

I looked straight into his eyes for an instant, then saw he was holding a Soviet-type grenade in his right hand. I was still holding him with my left hand but with my right hand I brought up my MP5 and fired two bursts into his centre of mass at point blank range. He fell to the bottom of the stairs like a sack of potatoes and lay there, as two more members of the team fired into him to make sure. The grenade rolled out of his hand and I saw that the pin was still in it. I checked his neck for a pulse and felt nothing, then picked the grenade up and put it in the pocket of my ops waistcoat.

There were still wailing, crying hostages coming downstairs, as well as the sound of sporadic gunfire and flash-bangs as every room in the Embassy was cleared. Looking around, there was a sort of eerie mist throughout the interior, a mixture of gas and smoke from the flash-bangs which had been used throughout the operation.

By now the first floor of the Embassy was beginning to burn fiercely and we needed to evacuate all our callsigns from the building. My team would continue to dominate the stairwell until everyone was accounted for and out in the safety of the back garden. With everybody out, I took a last look round and remember seeing Faisal, spread-eagled, bullet riddled and motionless on the floor at the bottom of the stairs, then I stepped out too.

We'd been given a simple mission: 'Rescue the hostages' and we'd done it. Mission accomplished and it had only taken 11 minutes.

We hung around in the garden for a few minutes, watching as the hostage reception team did their stuff. One of the terrorists had managed to get outside but he was quickly identified by Sim Harris, a BBC sound man who'd been at the Embassy trying to get a visa when the terrorists attacked, and he was rapidly taken into custody by the police. Strangely, we didn't feel any great sense of jubilation, there was no high-fiving or backslapping and we kept our respirators on in case any intrepid photographers or news crews had managed to get an angle on the rear of the building. I told my team to head back to the holding area and when we got there, safely inside the RCGP, we finally took the gas masks off.

The first thing I did was to ask the police sergeant who was running the

security at the holding area – an Irishman – what the score in the snooker was but he hadn't been watching and didn't know. We quickly got changed back into our civvies and packed our kit for the move back to RPB. I looked briefly into the TV room to check the snooker score and to retrieve my gloves, which were lying on the table where I'd left them.

With our kit packed away, we were quickly moved into unmarked civilian cars and driven back to RPB by the police for debrief. When we arrived back at our accommodation, we were met by Pete Scholey who gave each of us a can of cold beer. Pete was an old-stager who'd been with the Regiment since the early 1960s in Borneo and been an original member of B Squadron when it reformed. He was now a staff sergeant in the Operations Research department and had been with us to make sure that all the kit worked properly. He reckoned that we'd need a drink after the operation and had been out and bought a ton of lager with his own money. I've got to say, that beer barely touched the sides as I drank it down.

With that done, we had a more formal reception from the Metropolitan Police who gave us each a plastic bag for our weapons. Each one was registered against our regimental 'NAAFI Number' and taken away for forensic testing so that they could work out who'd fired what at who.

Once the police had gone, everything calmed down and the TV was switched on to see who had won the snooker. There was general disappointment at the news that Cliff Thorburn had beaten Higgins but this was followed by surprise as we watched the TV news coverage of the assault. The BBC had had a camera team up by the Royal Geographical Society at the top of Exhibition Road and they had produced some astonishingly clear footage of Johnny Mac and Mel taking out the first floor window at the front of the building, and subsequently rescuing Sim Harris from the fire. As this was playing out there was a commotion at the back of the room as the Commanding Officer came in, closely followed by William 'Oyster Eyes' Whitelaw, the Home Secretary, who was literally crying tears of relief, as he walked round the room, shaking everyone by the hand. There was someone else with him too, a small woman with a big handbag, and it took a moment to realise that it was Margaret Thatcher, the Prime Minister, accompanied by the faithful Denis. As we drank our beer, Mrs Thatcher worked the room, talking to everyone and shaking hands. The late news came on when she was standing by the TV. Johnny Mac wanted to watch himself again and gave a big shout: 'Oi, sit down at the front: we want to see this!' Mrs Thatcher

swiftly moved out of the way. Once she had spoken to everyone and thanked us all she gave a short speech, ending with, ‘It made us all – all – proud to be British!’ which got her a cheer.

After that, it was time to move out and head back to Hereford in slow time. I stopped my group at a greasy spoon outside Cirencester where we got bacon and egg sandwiches and a cup of tea, then carried on back to camp. As we drove through the gates, the Ministry of Defence policeman on duty gave us a big thumbs up and shouted something like ‘Great operation, lads’ and I thought to myself: Y*eah, it was wasn’t it?*

But then it was back to reality. We parked the vehicles up in the secure hangar and I picked up my personal kit and walked home.

It was the early hours of the morning when I got there but my German Shepherd, Sabre, was waiting for me, while my fiancée was asleep upstairs. I poured myself a glass of whisky and drank it, then fell asleep in the armchair.

Next morning I walked back to camp where we had an internal B Squadron debrief on the operation, and after that, it was back to work. Doing all the post-operational stuff that has to happen after every operation: cleaning vehicles and equipment; and getting everything ready in case another situation kicked off. We were given the Friday, Saturday and Sunday off work whilst one of the other squadrons covered the counter-terrorist team and we took the opportunity to calm down and have a few beers at various pubs and haunts around town.

All of a sudden the SAS were flavour of the month and it was funny to see all the civvie wannabes hanging around town in their camouflage jackets and shades, making out that they’d been on the operation. Twats.

On Monday morning, a Metropolitan Police team turned up to take statements from us all, wanting a blow-by-blow account of everything that had taken place inside the Embassy. After I’d given mine, I had a sudden realisation that 5 May 1980 had unarguably been the best and most important day of my life so far. It had been almost magical.

CHAPTER TEN
BACK TO IRELAND

After three full years in the Regiment, promotion to lance corporal and the Iranian Embassy Siege I was at last beginning to feel as though I was a fully accepted member. Of course, nobody is ever completely secure in the SAS – or any other part of the army for that matter – because if you fuck up badly, you're out, but nobody was expecting me to fail any more, and that's a good feeling.

The Iranian Embassy had brought a lot of change in 22 SAS. Before it happened, nobody outside military circles had really recognised the significance of what we could do. Military buffs tended to think of the SAS as a kind of Commando unit, harking back to the Regiment's role in World War II, and while there had been some media coverage of our work in Northern Ireland, quite a lot of it had been negative: as if we were some sort of military hit squad. From the evening of 5 May onwards, everyone in the world knew who we were. They couldn't name us individually, but we were suddenly national heroes – or villains, depending on your political perspective.

It also changed how we were perceived in the army. Before the Embassy Siege, nobody took much notice of us when we bumped into other parts of the army during exercises and training; now there was an almost embarrassing feeling that we were being treated like pop stars. Another change was noticeable in the kind of people who wanted to join.

Since the SAS had re-formed as a regular regiment in the 1950s, serving in it had been seen as a sideways step out of the mainstream army. This was particularly true for officers, who often missed out on promotion and high rank as a result, but also for NCOs too. The kind of high-quality blokes who got through selection would, for the most part, have had stellar careers if they'd stayed with their original units but if they stayed in the SAS, that wasn't going to happen. They were now in a small unit composed almost entirely of intelligent and highly competent soldiers and competition for promotion and advancement was going to be that much fiercer.

Despite that, we accepted it because the nature of what we did made it worth it for us. Most of us had realised that we would have a far more satisfying career doing SAS tasks than we would have done being bounced around in the bullshit-ridden ‘green’ army and to get that, we had to make sacrifices. There were two pay-offs.

The first was that 22 SAS had a firm base in Hereford and wasn’t going anywhere, so if you wanted to, you could put down roots and settle down – always accepting that our role meant that we would be travelling around much of the time but that we always had a home to go back to.

The second was that after we had finished in the army, there was always employment available on the private security ‘circuit’, where having been a member of the SAS was a pretty much guaranteed route to interesting and lucrative jobs.

Not long after the Embassy Siege, the government introduced ‘Special Forces pay’ which was an additional supplement paid to members of the SAS, the Special Boat Service (SBS) and the Det to recognise our additional training, the inherent dangers of the job and the fact that we were more or less constantly on operations. This was quite a substantial amount. If I remember rightly, it started off at about ten quid a day which was the equivalent of a promotion and it’s gone up and up ever since. For someone coming from a crap-hat unit, like most of the guys in 8 Troop, who were also now getting parachute pay, it added up to a serious incentive.

The army also began to look harder at SAS officers and realised that by sidelining them as ‘oddballs’, they were missing out on a real pool of talent. Suddenly, a tour as a troop commander or a squadron commander was a worthwhile tick on their CV.

All of which meant that people were queuing up to attempt selection, and it was a different group of people than before. It was no longer only guys who wanted to soldier at the top level for soldiering’s sake but also the ambitious and those who were hungry for money. And that can have a big effect in a small unit.

This was all slightly in the future at this stage. In B Squadron in May 1980, we still had the rest of our tour as the counter-terrorist team to push out on the basis that there’s no rest for the wicked, nor for the unit that had pulled off the most successful mass hostage rescue in history. We were desperate, of course, for another terrorist incident to kick off but, probably not surprisingly, international terrorism decided to give the UK a wide berth after

the Embassy and nothing of significance happened.

Our next operational deployment was back to Northern Ireland in the spring of 1981 but before that happened, Major G, who was still Officer Commanding B Squadron, had the brainwave of sending a number of members of the squadron on the Det surveillance course, and I was one of the lucky ones chosen for this.

The Det was originally formed back in the early 1970s before the SAS got seriously involved in Northern Ireland. A lot of people seemed to have thought it was a front for the Regiment but it wasn't; it was a specialist unit who were originally given training by the Intelligence Corps and MI5 in surveillance skills – and by the SAS in CQB – and then basically got on with it, evolving their own operating procedures over time. By 1981, they were pretty good at all of this and they'd come under the umbrella of Special Forces in order to maintain their security and their selection and training standards.

In consequence, when I was put forward to do their surveillance training there was no need to do the Det selection process, which was very different to ours, or any of the CQB aspect, which was based on what we already did. In fact the first thing I had to do was a week-long photography course at the SAS training area.

I'd had a vague interest in photography for quite a while but I'd never really understood what could be achieved with a camera until I did this course. Using the basic Nikon FM, we covered everything from simple mug-shots, through long-range photography with telephoto and super-telephoto lenses, aerial photography from helicopters, infra-red and panoramic. We also learned how to develop and print our own pictures. All in all, a very informative course and one which I learned a lot from. In fact, on the back of this, I was appointed chief photographer at Jim Spicer's – one of the guys from 8 Troop's – wedding.

In the background to this I also got married for the first time, to a girl from Hereford called Alison. I was in love with her and I thought she loved me too. As things turned out over the next few years, it emerged that I was wrong on the second count, at least.

With the photography course under my belt, Pete Bing, 'Tiny', 'Saddlebags' and I joined up with the surveillance course proper. This was due to take a number of weeks and involved a lot of long, long days. Of course, long hours and tiredness go hand in hand and in this there was an

element of selection for the guys joining the Det. In Northern Ireland, in fact in any operational zone, you cannot afford to make mistakes: lives are on the line. Staying alert and focused despite exhaustion was key to this.

The training took place in various areas around the west of England and throughout it we carried a 9mm Browning pistol which we needed to keep concealed at all times. A lot of the practical stuff was done in some city areas which, back in those days, were developing reputations as ‘no-go’ areas for white people but, in addition, we also spent a considerable amount of time in the classroom learning about the theoretical side of surveillance, anti-surveillance, counter-surveillance and close target recce.

If you’d asked me beforehand, I wouldn’t have thought that the theoretical training would be much use, but I came to see that it was an indispensable part of the course if you actually wanted to put this stuff into practice in the Province. As a result, I found myself revising late into the night quite regularly when we weren’t out doing practical training, which clearly didn’t please my new wife very much.

On the other hand, I loved the practical side of it. We did a lot of shooting with live ammunition, car-follows to practise our surveillance drills and close target recces to gather information on targets of every imaginable description. Initially we worked in pairs, but the aim was that eventually we would develop the skills and confidence to work ‘one-up’, that is, alone.

This was a real challenge. On your own, you have to think about everything: vehicle security; navigation; driving; communication over the radio; and all without standing out in any way, either to surveillance-aware targets, or to simple passers-by who might spot you.

One of the key things you learn is that you always need a reason to be somewhere – a cover story if you like – and if you can successfully do this, people will simply ignore you. If, on the other hand, you attract attention by looking out of place, then you’re putting yourself seriously at risk; terrorist ‘dickers’ – their own surveillance people – were always watching out for us.

On return from a long day, one of the most important elements was being able to give a concise and comprehensive verbal briefing to the team or individual taking over from you. If you missed something out, or made something up, again, you’d be putting them at serious risk. Verbal briefings often needed to be followed up with a written report, and any photography you’d done needed to be passed over for development and printing, and then marked up when it was available.

A typical scenario for one of our training exercises would be as follows:

> Let's assume I've been given a mission to follow, 'house' and report on an armed terrorist. The first task for me and the team I'm working with is to actually find the terrorist. We've been given a description of his vehicle, including the number plate, as well as what he looks like and what he's wearing, so that part is beyond our control and if it's wrong, we're fucked. But if it's right, then we need to pick him up and begin the follow, at all times reporting back by radio on the route we're on and our direction of travel. If we have multiple vehicles and teams available, we might be able to interchange the lead vehicle, but if not, it's going to be up to us to stay with him and not get noticed or compromised. Then the task is to 'house' him. That means to identify where he's stopped and, if possible, identify what kind of weapon he's carrying.
>
> Once we've housed the terrorist, the next step is to keep his location under surveillance until base can jack up a response. Normally speaking, that would be to send an armed SAS team to make an arrest. If the terrorist or terrorists surrender, then fine but if they resist arrest, it's all going to end badly for them.

It sounds straightforward enough but the reality of working in a hostile environment is that it never is. The guys we were following were experienced, surveillance-aware and very violent. They were not going to make it easy for us.

After eight weeks of training with no days off, I then had a police defensive driving course. This was run by a pair of brothers from Worcester who were police driving instructors and really knew their stuff, and the purpose was to teach us how to drive the powerful Range Rovers that the 'special projects' teams used quickly but safely. This was fun, fast and furious stuff, zipping along with blue lights flashing through the country lanes and A-roads at speeds up to and over 100 miles per hour. As we did this, we needed to communicate with the police control rooms for the areas we were passing through, and also give a running commentary to the instructor, explaining every move we made. At the end of each day, I felt exhausted and completely drained but again, I really enjoyed it all, and was delighted to learn that I'd passed.

It must have been mid-1981 when we deployed to Northern Ireland. We were based in what was probably one of the most secure locations in the whole Province, and it had good facilities for us including ranges, a well-equipped gym, sports pitches, squash courts and a tennis court housed inside a blow-up dome where we used to play regular matches. One of the more amusing aspects of this was that the Regimental Police from the regular unit

based nearby used to bring ‘soldiers under sentence’, who were serving short periods of detention, down to the tennis courts to act as ball boys for us. They would be in full uniform, minus hat, but with a pack on their back, crouching by the net as we played, just like Wimbledon. When a ball went out, the RPs would set them off at double time to get it which was great for us, probably not so much fun for them. I’m not sure you’d get away with that these days.

It was good that we were living on a well-equipped base because, from an operational point of view, this tour was just as quiet as the last one we’d done. On 5 May 1981 – exactly one year after the Iranian Embassy Siege – Bobby Sands died on hunger strike in the Maze Prison so the political temperature was hot, but throughout the time we were there, there were no major terrorist incidents.

So, much the same as before, we were mostly employed in intelligence gathering, mounting observation posts on known or suspected terrorist locations and attempting to identify the terrorists themselves, as well as their families and associates.

A typical example was when we received information that a particular house was being used as an IRA bomb factory and were tasked to put it under observation. We deployed as a four-man patrol, split into two teams of two, with me and John Mac forming one pair.

The first task was to carry out a close target recce and establish a suitable position for an OP. We headed down there in a vehicle and, about a mile or so from the target, we were dropped off, armed to the teeth, so we could make our way across country to the house. Once there, we established a lie-up position and checked our map to make sure we were at the correct location. Once we’d confirmed this, John and I crept forwards, leaving the other two within earshot to cover us through the night. We moved as stealthily as possible and got in close to the building, noting registrations of vehicles, suspicious activity by individuals and any comings or goings. The frustrating thing was that even if we saw a weapon in a terrorist’s hands, we were forbidden from challenging them or taking any action other than noting the information. Our mission was to gain intelligence, and Special Branch were interested in the bigger picture. The only circumstance in which we could shoot was if we were compromised and terrorists pointed their weapons at us, or if shots were fired, in which case I, for one, would have happily blown them to kingdom come without batting an eyelid.

We spent most of the night in close proximity to the building before

stealthily withdrawing, RV'ing with the other pair and making our way back to where the vehicle was waiting for us. Back at base we were debriefed on all the information we had gathered. The vehicle registrations were then passed on to a Det surveillance team who would try to establish who was using them, and who, where and why they were meeting, and thus seek to build up the bigger picture. In the meantime, a standing observation post would be inserted close to the building we'd recced to ensure that it was under 24-hour observation for at least the next ten days.

It's fair to say that within the squadron, the ideal outcome of an operation like this would be a building assault and the opportunity to blow the bastards occupying it away. Unfortunately, it rarely comes to that. Instead, about a month after the operation started there were a series of raids in which bomb-making equipment and explosives were found, and this led to terrorists being taken off the street and put in jail. In reality, that wasn't a bad result at all even if it didn't fully satisfy our aggressive instincts.

One December Saturday during this tour I decided to take a trip into Belfast to do some shopping and have a look around the place. Specifically I was interested in seeing how it had changed since I was working in the 'segments' with 49 Field Regiment. I signed out a car and headed out towards Nutt's Corner where there was usually a weekend market. I was alone but comfortable that I knew the route and the area pretty much inside out. I was, as always, carrying my 9mm Browning Hi Power, loaded and ready with a round in the breech, but with the safety catch – operated by the right thumb – in the 'on' position. When I was walking around I would have the pistol in a covert holster inside the waistband of my jeans on my right hip, but for driving I used to place it under my leg so that I could get at it quickly in an emergency.

I drove into the city along the Belfast Road, parked up and did my shopping, as well as meeting up with a couple of guys I knew for a coffee. I still had the problem of looking like Joseph Doherty – particularly as I had long hair and a moustache – who had managed to escape from Crumlin Road Jail earlier in the year while on trial for murdering Captain Westmacott, so, as usual, I kept my ID card in my hand, ready to show to any army or police patrol that stopped me.

Once I'd finished what I was doing, I went back to my car and, after giving it a quick check over to make sure it hadn't been booby trapped, headed off back to base.

I decided not to take the same route back – varying our routes is part of our training and is just common sense really – and instead decided to go through Andersonstown on a route which would take me via the Glen Road back to the Nutt's Corner roundabout and then back to base.

I passed down the Falls Road without any problems, got past the two cemeteries and then onto the Glen Road. Traffic was heavy on Saturday afternoon and I was moving along quite slowly. But this gave me the chance to look out over the football pitches which were off to my right.

I continued to grind along at a snail's pace until eventually, the two cars in front of me came to a stop. All of a sudden, two guys wearing balaclavas jumped from one of the stopped cars and were moving quickly towards me, approaching from either side. *Fuck!* It's amazing how quickly the adrenaline starts pumping: we'd practised this kind of scenario on endless occasions and it was almost as if my subconscious reactions took over. I knew my doors were locked so they wouldn't be able to gain access to the vehicle straight away: this was our standard operating procedure. As the two guys closed on my car, I couldn't see a weapon, but it was clearly my vehicle they were coming for, and they were just feet away from me.

I'd left space in front of me when the two cars had stopped and as one of the men went for the passenger door I manoeuvred my vehicle up onto the pavement, knocking the other one flat in the process, as he reached for the driver's door. Driving on the pavement, I manoeuvred round the two cars in front of me and back onto the Glen Road. There was a loud bang and I realised that someone had fired a gun at me but I couldn't see where the shot had come from through the rear view mirror. I floored the accelerator and rapidly changed up through the gears, swerving through the traffic. I was focused now on anti-surveillance drills: was I being followed? By the time I reached Nutt's Corner, it was clear that I wasn't.

I had no way of reporting the incident because I had no communications and this was, of course, in the days before mobile phones were available. Instead, as soon as I got back to base, I reported in at the operations room and gave them an outline of what had happened and set about getting the vehicle changed. My actions in escaping the car-jacking had clearly demonstrated that I was a member of the security forces and the car would now be compromised.

To this day I do not know whether the hijacking attempt was a deliberate attempt to grab a member of the security forces or whether it was just a

random attempt to steal a car for some other purpose. For it to have been deliberate, either I or the car would have to have been compromised at some point. I didn't think it was me. I hadn't been showing my face around in Belfast during the tour and I'm reasonably sure I would have picked up any surveillance on the way in to Belfast or while I was shopping. The car was a possibility. Having said that, it would have been a remarkably slick operation to get a hijacking together on the basis of my more or less random trip into the city. Not impossible, but unlikely. In any event, I decided that I wouldn't lose any sleep over it.

We had a lot of time on our hands on this particular tour and that led to more socialising than was usual. There were various places you could go to if you wanted a drink or a meal but going out inevitably meant that we would have to be armed at all times and that at least one member of the group would need to stay stone cold sober, both to drive and to maintain security in case we were compromised as members of the security forces.

So as an alternative to going out, we would occasionally go to one of the other military bases where you could get a few drinks and a bed for the night afterwards in complete security. On one occasion I had gone with Gerry, John Mac, the Mink and a few others to Belfast for a few beers at a bar we knew in a local barracks. We were minding our own business, having a mellow evening on the beer when a group of Royal Air Force (RAF) NCOs came in. In typical RAF style they were very neat and clean-cut, in complete contrast to our group with our long-hair, big sideys and moustaches; and a couple of them were also bodybuilders, as you could tell from their tight t-shirts over bulging pectorals and biceps.

We didn't take much notice of them and got on with our drinking but one of the bodybuilders started making noisy remarks about us: how scruffy we were with our long hair and grungy civilian clothes. I should have known better but this started to get on my tits. I wasn't looking for trouble but this clown was beginning to upset me.

Eventually he came over to where we were standing, made some insulting remark and poked me in the chest. That did it. I hit him once and down he went, out for the count. *Oh shit*. Two of the 8 Troop guys grabbed my arms and hustled me outside the bar whilst the others checked on Mr Muscles to make sure he was OK.

I'm the first to admit that I'd had too much to drink that evening but by then, drink usually mellowed me and I suspect that my violent reaction to a

bit of taunting from an idiot – I mean, who did he think we were? – was probably the result of the frustration of a more or less fruitless tour, constant cancelled operations and maybe a few things from my personal life too. I was newly married and my wife was pregnant and that isn't a good time for a long separation on an operational tour.

Luckily for me – and him too – the RAF guy wasn't badly hurt and the rest of the Troop managed to cool things down. If there had been any charges, the likelihood is that that would have been the end of my SAS career: I would certainly have been RTU'd and quite possibly permanently for my lack of self-discipline. Fortunately, I wasn't charged. I learned my lesson and never let anything like it happen again.

We finished that tour in January and I was back in Hereford in time to be present at the birth of my first son, Mark Anthony Firmin, in February 1982. We had a team task coming up later in the year in southern Africa and I was looking forward to a relatively quiet period at home before then, doing a language course on camp in order to prepare for it. It would be a good time to get to know my baby son.

CHAPTER ELEVEN
SUICIDE MISSION

There's a basic rule in special operations: once you start believing your own mythology, you're in trouble. In the nearly five years I'd been with the Regiment, I'd learned that the keys to successful operations were meticulous planning based on solid intelligence; exhaustive training and rehearsal; and ruthless determined execution. But in May 1982, we began to plan for an operation which, even then, looked like a kamikaze mission and which, with 30 years hindsight, looks stark, staring mad. Amongst the people who planned it was an officer who went on to 4-star rank and a reputation as one of the British Army's most effective general officers; he ought to be lying awake at night thanking God the operation was never executed but knowing him, I'd bet he isn't.

In April 1982, B Squadron was going through a training cycle, getting ready to disperse on 'team tasks' around the world. I was part of a group doing a Portuguese language course in the education centre on camp in Hereford. When we'd finished, we were supposed to go to Mozambique to form a training team to work with the army, who were fighting against a guerrilla group called RENAMO. This group was originally set up by the Rhodesians – and actually by members of the Rhodesian SAS, alias 'C Squadron' – to destabilise their neighbour during the Rhodesian war and to prevent help coming to the ZANLA (Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army) and ZIPRA (Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army) guerrillas. However, although that was all over, they were still operating out in the bush, causing problems both for Mozambique and for the new Zimbabwean government.

My son Mark was then about six weeks old, so he was the big focus in my life at that time but even though I was supposed to be learning vocabulary and conjugating verbs, I was also thinking about getting out to sub-Saharan Africa and wondering about the challenges it was likely to pose.

So the Falkland Islands weren't really on my radar. I don't think I'd ever heard of them before the invasion happened and some of the lads, who had

heard the name, had a vague idea that they were somewhere near Scotland. Invaded by Argentina? What the fuck was that about?

Like everybody else in the country, we'd had virtually no notice of anything happening: there'd been a few stories in the media about some scrap metal dealers turning up on South Georgia but none of us had joined the dots at all. Suddenly, everyone was running around like headless chickens, as the Regiment prepared itself for operations. To be fair, it was a process that worked reasonably well.

As the next few days passed and the task force to go south was rapidly assembled, D Squadron and then G Squadron were called in and mobilised to sail down south with the navy. It was known as a 'Free Beer', a password they'd used back in the 1960s for a fast call-out.

In theory, we were next in line – A Squadron were the 'special projects team' and they weren't going anywhere, they were the 'stay behind squadron', always the bridesmaids and never the bride – and we were designated as the 'strategic reserve' for operations in the South Atlantic. Even so, at this stage nobody thought we'd be getting involved in a hurry. Whoever heard of three SAS squadrons being sent on the same operation? Never going to happen, mate.

But fuck me backwards it did.

The invasion had taken place on 2 April. Details were hazy at first; early photographs from the Argentine media showed Argentine Navy ships in Port Stanley harbour, and Argentine Special Forces taking the Royal Marines' garrison as prisoners of war but not much else filtered down to us and, with D and G Squadrons out of the way, we knuckled down with our own training. If I'm honest, I suspected it was all going to fizzle out and there would be some kind of diplomatic fudge which would leave the Falklands in Argentine hands. That's what would have happened in the past. Of course, we now had Maggie Thatcher in charge. The Iranian Embassy had shown that she wasn't the kind of leader who was going to back down.

Apart from all the diplomacy, with people like Alexander Haig shuttling between Washington, London and Buenos Aires trying to sort things out, the next piece of serious news which filtered down was the recapture of South Georgia in the last week of April.

The story around Hereford was that D Squadron had played a key role in the operation and it wasn't until much later we found out what a cock-up it had all been. The boys from 19 Troop had been landed on a glacier on the

island to do a recce of the Argie positions but the weather had been so shit – freezing temperatures, blizzards and high winds – that they'd soon realised that they were in serious trouble and called for a helicopter evacuation. This went tits up when the pilot lost his horizon on the glacier thanks to a white-out and piled his helicopter in, and a second chopper, which was called in to evacuate the SAS team and the crew of the first helicopter, did more or less the same thing. This left the South Georgia task force with just one transport helicopter remaining but this one did manage to evacuate the SAS lads and both crews from the crashed choppers.

In the end, South Georgia was taken without much of a fight. A submarine had come from Argentina bringing reinforcements and supplies but one of our navy helicopters caught it on the surface when it tried to leave South Georgia, and nailed it with rockets and depth charges. The submarine struggled back into harbour and the task force commander quickly landed a mixed company's worth of Marines and SAS to take advantage of the situation. The Argies saw them coming, shit their pants and surrendered.

So that was round one to the Brits. South Georgia recaptured with no serious casualties. Although it wasn't obvious at the time, the war was now beginning to really hot up. Around this time we were quietly taken off our other training and given a warning order for a mysterious operation in the South Atlantic.

The purpose of the warning was to give us a heads-up so we could get on with preparation and training. The outline we were given was to prepare for a tactical airlanding from C-130s followed by a target attack and the idea being put about was that the landing would take place at Port Stanley followed by an attack against a nearby target. What would this be? Argentine headquarters on the Falklands perhaps, or maybe their air defence control centre. If we took that out, I suppose there was a chance that we could have dropped an airborne battlegroup onto Stanley, though, chatting about it with the lads, it seemed highly unlikely.

Even so, it gave us a framework for training. As our training package started, we moved the squadron to RAF Brize Norton, near Oxford, and started to practise the drills for loading the squadron plus vehicles, weapons, explosives and equipment onto two C-130s, and then for a rapid tactical de-bus at the far end. This training was for everyone involved, not just us. So once we'd got the aircraft loaded, we then got several hours of low-level tactical flying to get us to our destination which was usually the RAF base at

Lossiemouth in Scotland.

Once on the deck, the rear ramps of the C-130s were lowered and when the aircraft was taxi-ing at the right speed, we drove down in the pinkies and headed for our targets. That's easier written than done. Several times during this initial training package we had seriously bumpy landings and it was clear to us that trying to do the same thing under anti-aircraft fire on a landing strip which had been bombed was a non-starter. 'This is going to be a fucking Wild West Show', was the general opinion, and it was fair to say that morale in B Squadron – for some of us – was in our boots. I'd been in the Regiment five years by now, so I was still relatively junior, but there were senior guys in the squadron, who'd been there since the 1960s in some cases, who thought this was a suicide mission and weren't afraid to say so.

Meanwhile there was a real war going on. Five days after South Georgia was retaken, the first of the Vulcan raids on Port Stanley airfield took place and, at roughly the same time and with much less publicity of course, the first Special Forces recces were going ashore from G Squadron and the Shaky Boats.* All very interesting for those in the know but both were dwarfed the next day by the news that the Argie cruiser *Belgrano* had been torpedoed and sunk with, it was assumed, hundreds of casualties. You didn't need to be Mystic Meg to know that the shit had just hit the fan.

* Shaky Boats = The Special Boat Service (SBS).

Up until then it had pretty much been a phoney war. Both sides had been posturing at each other, making scary noises but not actually doing very much except building up forces whilst diplomacy supposedly took its course and now, suddenly, Britain had given Argentina a massive kick in the nuts and they were going to have to fold or fight. They decided to fight.

Two days after the *Belgrano* went down, the Argies hit back. In 1978 the US government had finally introduced an arms embargo as a response to the Argentine military government's campaign of murder against its own citizens. This meant that the Argentine Navy could no longer get spares for its old American-made Skyhawk fighter bombers. As a result, the Argies decided to shop around and eventually fixed on the modern French-made 'Super Etendard' as a replacement. This was a small, agile jet aircraft capable of operating either from Argentina's aircraft carrier, the *25 de Mayo*, or from the naval airbases along Argentina's Atlantic coast. The key thing about the Super Etendard was that it could launch the Exocet missile.

Now the Exocet was the real bugger. It's an anti-shipping missile with a range of around 40 miles and a warhead of about 350lb of high explosives, enough to blow a great big hole in a relatively flimsy modern warship. The clever thing about it was that it was designed to skim along just above the wave tops – no more than three to six feet up – for most of its flight, before switching on its active radar for the last few thousand yards, thus ensuring pinpoint accuracy but very little warning for the ship on the receiving end. Modern defensive weapons could take out an incoming Exocet, even back in 1982, but very few of the ships we had out there were equipped with them. By the time that the Falklands War broke out, the Argentine Navy had taken delivery of five Super Etendards and five of the air-launched AM39 Exocet missiles.

A little before 8am local time on 4 May, an Argentine Lockheed Neptune maritime recce aircraft spotted HMS *Sheffield* on its radar and reported its position back to the Argentine mainland. The *Sheffield* was by then in position to the west of the Falkland Islands, acting as an anti-aircraft early warning ship. Soon after, two Super Etendards were launched from the Rio Grande naval airbase on Tierra del Fuego as part of an attack package, along with a tanker aircraft and two escort fighters. The Super Etendards refuelled and then moved into attack profile.

The Argentine aircraft were picked up on the radars of some ships in the task force but, for some reason, the warning wasn't passed round the fleet. When the Super Etendards were about 20 or 30 miles from the *Sheffield*, they launched their Exocets and turned for home. The Exocets had been programmed with the coordinates of the *Sheffield* and headed straight for it at more than 700 miles per hour. A few miles out, they automatically switched on their active homing radar. It was at this point that the *Sheffield* detected them but there was very little time to act. Lookouts spotted the smoke trails left by the missiles and, with no more than five seconds warning, one of the Exocets ploughed into the British warship, whilst the second missed and hit the sea half a mile away.

The effect on the British ship was massive. The missile didn't actually explode, for some reason, but the impact of a 1,500lb missile at 700 miles per hour tore a huge hole in the side of the ship and the unburned rocket propellant started a series of fires which the crew couldn't fight because the impact had severed the water main on the ship. Twenty sailors were killed, many more injured, and the ship was abandoned.

Suddenly, it was a real war for the British as well. If we were going to have any hope of retaking the Falkland Islands, we needed to have a strong and secure naval presence, including naval aviation provided by the aircraft carriers. The Argentines had just demonstrated that they could take out our ships with relatively little difficulty. If they could nail the *Sheffield*, there was no reason why they couldn't also hit the *Hermes*, the *Illustrious* or the *Invincible*; or even one of the landing ships, *Fearless* or *Intrepid*. The powers that be suddenly realised that this was a war we could lose much more easily than we could win.

Those calculations were well above my pay grade of course, but it suddenly became apparent that somebody, somewhere was having a good hard think about making the odds a bit more even, because all of a sudden, B Squadron's training got really serious and new kit was being thrown at us like it was Christmas.

We'd been told that the next phase of preparation would be a move down to a forward mounting base at Ascension Island which is stuck out in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean, roughly mid-way between Liberia and Brazil, and a little bit to the south of the Equator. This is one of those old colonial oddities: an island in the middle of nowhere which still belonged to Britain and which, because we'd allowed the Americans to build a base there during World War II, had a great big fuck-off runway.

We got a preliminary brief as a squadron, giving us an idea about what to expect in Ascension and telling us to get our kit together and packed for a short notice move; but, at this stage, there was still no confirmation of what our mission or target was or any idea how long the operation was going to last. This was routine: anytime there was any kind of crisis going on, Hereford was swamped with journalists trying to find out if and when we were deploying. There was a bus shelter on the main road, not far from the camp gates, which was pretty much a permanent observation post for the journalists and all the bars and pubs we used in town were full of people listening for any snippets they could pick up. From our point of view, it was good operational security for us not to know in any kind of detail where we were going or when so we weren't in a position to accidentally compromise it.

In an infantry battalion, your webbing and kit are normally packed according to a Standard Operating Procedure, so that everyone is normally carrying the same gear in pretty much the same place but those rules don't

apply in the Regiment. The main reason is that each member of an SAS patrol has at least one specialised role – commander, signaller, medic, demolitionist and so on – and will be carrying the equipment needed for it, together with their share of the patrol equipment. So in my bergan I would normally carry the patrol medical kit plus a selection of night viewing gear, explosives and dems kit, a camera, radio batteries etcetera. You do also need your personal gear: a poncho for shelter, a sleeping bag and a spare set of dry clothes and warm kit in a waterproof bag, to ensure that you can survive. From what we knew of the climate of the Falklands and the South Atlantic in general, it was going to be cold and wet, and we were all experienced enough to know that hypothermia and exposure can fuck up an operation just as badly as someone getting shot.

On my belt were the basics I would need to live and fight: ammunition, water and some food, together with a few other bits and pieces. Back then, the army issued ’58 pattern canvas webbing in a standard format which included a good belt, two big ammunition pouches which would take Bren gun magazines, a water bottle pouch, a gas-mask pouch, two big rear ‘kidney’ pouches and a canvas roll to wrap your poncho. This wasn’t really suitable for our needs so the Regiment had come up with their own system of pouches, all designed to hang below the bergan rucksack we usually patrolled with. In reality, most of the lads mixed and matched and I was no different. I had a belt made from a heavy-drop cargo strop with a couple of twin Armalite pouches, a water bottle pouch and a couple of pouches to carry a basic survival kit and some food: dry rations like tinned cheese, biscuits, chocolate and boiled sweets, and some brew kit. Between them, without the addition of ammunition and explosives, my belt and bergan weighed more than 90lb.

At home, the evening before the final brief, I packed some civilian clothes, a tracksuit and trainers and a few bits and pieces of personal gear into a GQ para bag – a kind of big holdall – and left home to walk down to the barracks in the early hours. As is often the case, I felt strongly conflicted: on the one hand, there was no denying I was excited about being part of an operation of this magnitude; on the other, I was wondering whether I would see my young son again or, for that matter, my big black and tan German Shepherd, Sabre. I wasn’t sure whether my wife was too bothered whether I made it back or not, but there we go.

But the feeling of gloom disappeared when I got onto camp. The rest of the

lads from the squadron were turning up from all over the place and we were straight back into the usual routine of banter, piss-taking and back-stabbing. That's one thing about the SAS: when we're all together, there isn't any time for introspection. Then it was into the Blue Room on camp – a big briefing room – for the mission brief.

It turned out to be a dramatic night. A lot of the regimental head shed were already down south with the task force – certainly that was where the Commanding Officer was – but in his place was Brigadier de la Billière who, as Director SAS, was responsible for all Special Forces units in the UK.

The background and situation was given by the regimental operations officer. The reason for the operation was clear enough: the Exocets were a serious threat to the task force and had to be eliminated. He talked through a potential timescale and the various components of the op. Then the squadron commander, Major M, had his say, giving out the various tasks; and finally the squadron sergeant major talked through the logistics of it.

So what was the plan? The idea was that we would move to a forward mounting base at Ascension Island and, from there, the squadron would fly south in two C-130s, refuelling in the air on the way, to the Argentine naval airbase at Rio Grande on Tierra del Fuego in the extreme south of Argentina. Coming in at low level, hopefully below the Argentine radar, these two aircraft would then land on the runway and taxi towards the airbase buildings. Once we were close enough, we would drive out of the C-130s in our pinkies, with some of the lads on foot, and then head for the aircraft hangars, the missile storage area and the Argentine pilots' accommodation. The Exocets would then be destroyed with explosives and hopefully the Super Etendards as well. The next element was a little controversial: we would find the Argentine pilots and kill them which would ensure that even if we hadn't got all the planes and missiles, there would be no one around to launch them.

Once all this was achieved, the plan was that, if the C-130s were still flyable, we would get back aboard, take off again and fly on to the Chilean airbase at Punta Arenas. If the aircraft had been taken out, we would break clean from the base and then evade across Tierra del Fuego to the Chilean border.

That was the main operation, given the codename Operation *Mikado* but there was a second strand as well. It was quite clear from the brief that intelligence about what was going on at Rio Grande was very thin on the ground. Nobody knew where the missiles were stored, or where the aircraft

were parked at night; we didn't know where the pilots slept. Satellite scanning had revealed some radar signatures, but there was no information about how the airbase was defended, and whether they had anti-aircraft guns or Surface-to-Air missiles in place; whether there were infantry dug in on the base or around the perimeter. In fact, the only mapping we had was a black and white map dated 1939, and some photocopies from the current *Times Atlas of the World*. From any standpoint, that was thoroughly inadequate and as a result, in order to give us the information we needed to actually launch the attack, a second operation, codenamed *Plum Duff* was being launched.

The purpose of *Plum Duff* was to get a recce team down onto the ground in Rio Grande to spy out exactly what the situation was at the airbase and in the town. A team from 9 Troop had already flown out to Ascension Island from where they were flown down to the task force around the Falkland Islands and parachuted into the sea, eventually winding up on the aircraft carrier HMS *Invincible*. From there, the plan was to fly them to Tierra del Fuego in a stripped-down navy Sea King, operating at extreme range, which would then be flown on into Chile and abandoned. If the recce team didn't make it, or they got compromised when they were in situ, the operation was going to be in serious shit.

Obviously we'd had a good idea about what was being planned from the training we'd been doing but it wasn't until that briefing that the full impact of it hit us. There seemed to be so many gaps in it. Someone asked about fighter cover for our flight in. De la Billière said something along the lines of we asked for a couple of Phantoms but we don't think they would survive against the Argie air defences. Well hang on a minute: if they're capable of knocking down Phantoms, what about C-130s? There was no real answer to that.

Someone else asked about arrangements for our reception in Chile if we had to evade after the attack: where should we make for? DLB was nodding his head, but he wasn't answering so the question was asked again: where's the pick-up point? He still didn't answer, and we began to realise that this hadn't been arranged at all. Either they didn't expect any of us to make it, or they wanted us to just trust to luck. Fucking hell.

Major M, the squadron commander, stood up to give his final pep talk:

'The bottom line is that we're at war and if this is what we have to do to make sure the task force is safe, then it's what we're going to do.'

It was not a happy mood as the briefing broke up and we started loading

our gear onto the four-tonners which would transport it to RAF Lyneham for loading onto our flight to Ascension. But then things got even worse. Word began to spread that DLB had sacked Major M as B Squadron's officer commanding and replaced him with Major C, the regimental second-in-command; even more shocking, Jakey, the 6 Troop staff sergeant, and one of the most experienced guys in the Regiment, had asked to resign because he believed that the operation was a needless suicide mission with little chance of success.

It was apparent that somewhere around the fringes of the briefing DLB had asked Major M what he thought of the plan and that Major M had given him a straight answer. DLB didn't like what he heard and had sacked Major M on the spot. That wasn't really his job but the commanding officer was down south and DLB was the man on the spot. I liked Major M: I'd worked with him in Northern Ireland and played rugby with him in the SAS and I thought he was treated unfairly. I don't know anyone in the squadron who thought that *Mikado* was a viable plan and in pointing this out, I reckon Major M showed more balls than DLB ever did.

A lot of guys in the squadron agreed with him, and as we waited for the coaches which would take us to Lyneham, there were heated discussions about what to do. To a lot of the guys, it looked like DLB was sacrificing us to enhance his own reputation: if the operation succeeded, it would be a brilliant strike at the heart of the Argie offensive capability and he'd get the credit; if it failed, it would have been a heroic but risky effort, let down by mechanical failure, or whatever. On the other hand, some members of the squadron felt equally strongly that, as soldiers, it was our duty to do what we had to do and if that meant a high-risk mission with the likelihood of serious casualties, then so be it. Some felt that the resistance to mounting the operation wasn't too far from mutiny, and they didn't want any part of it.

Whichever way the dice rolled, it was clear that a good few of us weren't coming back. But after what had happened to Major M and Jakey, some of the lads were genuinely worried about saying too much: it was definitely 'look over your shoulder' time. I suppose I was somewhere in the middle. I didn't want to do it but I was prepared to play my part if we went. At the end of the day, if it worked it would be fucking awesome.

At Lyneham we spent some time making sure that all the baggage had been properly checked in and that the vehicles, weapons and other squadron stores were properly loaded onto the C-130s. This had been done over the

past few days by a combination of RAF, SAS and civvies, supervised by the B Squadron quartermaster sergeant Fred Marafono, one of the small group of Fijians who'd joined the Regiment in the 1960s, and Pete Scholey, another B Squadron old-stager. Then it was off to the lounge and hurry up and wait. Some of the lads played cards, some smoked, some slept; I chatted with John McAleese, Minky and a few other 8 Troop lads, bumping our gums about how we were going to sort out the Argies. As you do.

Finally, the time came to board our flight. It was a long journey, well over 4,000 miles and it seemed to take for ever. There was a feeling of 'There's no turning back now' and I spent most of it trying and failing to get some sleep.

When we eventually landed at Ascension, the first thing that struck us was the heat and humidity of the place. It's only a little way south of the Equator and my first thought was 'well, this is nice' – there's nothing like a bit of tropical weather to perk you up. We were taken to accommodation close to the airfield to get ourselves sorted out.

The outline for the next couple of days was more preparation for the operation. The essential thing we were waiting for was the establishment of eyes on Rio Grande, courtesy of the 9 Troop lads. When they were in place, we should be able to get information in more or less real time. In the meantime, we carried on rehearsals through the heat of the days, landing the C-130s on Wideawake Airfield on Ascension, and then fanning out for the attack.

Apart from rehearsing the de-planing drill, we spent a lot of time on the ranges, getting weapons zeroed and just getting comfortable with them. I had an Armalite AR-15 assault rifle, an M-203 over-and-under 40mm grenade launcher and a 9mm Browning pistol, which would give me plenty of personal firepower, and most of the rest of the lads were carrying a similar load.

As well as shooting, we practised cross-country movement in the vehicles. If we did need to evade across country into Chile, we were going to need to move fast and if any of the vehicles had survived the assault, they would be the obvious choice. Ascension is a volcanic island and a lot of the terrain consists of fossilised volcanic lava flows, and we practised getting around them. Reputedly the golf course there is the worst in the world: the 'greens' consist of volcanic dust and are known as 'browns' and I've got to say they weren't improved at all by us driving our Landrovers and motorbikes over them.

The highest point on Ascension is ‘Green Mountain’, an extinct volcano nearly 3,000 feet high, and this formed the focal point for our fitness training. A run up and down there was certainly something you knew all about but it was worth doing: once again, if we were evading we were going to have to move fast and I definitely didn’t fancy being last in the daisy-chain in an Argie military prison if I got caught.

We’d all deployed to Ascension in our normal work/combat gear, which consisted of the camouflaged ‘tropical’ trousers and shirt we got issued for the jungle and the standard SAS-issue ‘windproof’ smock which is a great bit of kit but which is definitely only windproof rather than waterproof. That was fine on a tropical island but Tierra del Fuego, heading into the southern winter, was going to be rather different. The army-issue camouflage waterproofs at the time were made of nylon and PVC which was OK if you were standing still but meant you became overheated and soaked in sweat very quickly if you did anything strenuous whilst wearing them, so they were no good for our purposes. The quartermaster back in Hereford decided to sort this out and went and bought all of the Gore-tex jackets and trousers he could get hold of at the local camping shops, and these were duly dispatched to us. Normally when new and expensive kit is issued you have to sign for it, but Fred Marafono just dished it out: we were on a suicide mission, if anyone made it back were they really going to pursue him for a waterproof jacket? The only minor problem was that they weren’t in military colours, but we soon worked out that we could wear them under our camouflage gear.

A similar attitude prevailed with money. The SAS is a pretty grown up organisation and usually takes the attitude that you work hard and you play hard, then you rest. There were a few bars at Ascension and we weren’t restricted from going into them for a few beers after work. John Mac and I would go to one called the ‘Volcano Club’, which had two snooker tables, where we could wind down after a long day with a couple of frames. Generally speaking, we took it easy on the beer. The operation was still on and we needed to be sharp.

On 16 May, word went round that Operation *Plum Duff* was going in. I wasn’t there, so I’m not an eyewitness but we picked up a description of what happened afterwards from the lads who were. The aircraft had landed and three of the men were already on the ground when the commander made the decision to abort over concerns that the mission had been compromised.

The boss made his decision and shouted down to Gwyn D, who was

already on the ground, ‘Sorry lads, it’s Chile after all.’

Gwyn didn’t understand him: ‘Chilly? It’s fucking freezing!’

They got back on board the Sea King and the pilot flew onwards to Chilean territory. He dropped our lads off out in the cuds and then flew as close as he could get towards the Chilean town of Punta Arenas before he ran out of fuel. The crew ditched the helicopter on the edge of a forest about ten miles from Punta Arenas, torched it and hid up until morning, before handing themselves in the next day to the Chilean authorities, who arranged for them to be flown back to the UK.

Our lads meanwhile lay up for the night and then headed for their designated ‘War RV’ where they expected to meet an SAS officer working undercover inside Chile who would arrange for their exfiltration. They were more than a little surprised when he didn’t show up; nor was he at the alternate War RV the next day. In reality, they didn’t have many options now and the only realistic one seemed to be to hand themselves over to the Chilean police and hope for the best. They headed for a one-horse border village to find someone to surrender to and were astonished to see their SAS contact through the window of a café, getting stuck into a meal and a *cerveza*. I guess it came as a bit of a shock for the Chileans who ran the place when a couple of cammed-up, heavily-armed Brits sauntered through the front door, but probably not as much as it was for their contact, Andy G, who hadn’t been expecting to meet them until the next day due to some communications cock-up.

But back on Ascension Island we knew none of this and were expecting to get the order to move at any time so we carried on training and rehearsing, polishing our drills as finely as we could in the absence of any hard information about what our target constituted.

The next piece of news that did filter back to us on Ascension was almost unimaginable. On 19 May, word came back that a Sea King carrying a whole crowd of lads from D and G Squadrons had gone down in the South Atlantic and that many of them had been killed. We didn’t have any details about what had happened or who exactly was dead but the word was that as many as 20 were gone. It was almost unbelievable. My first thought was ‘what a fucking waste of life’.

I remember sitting with a bunch of the lads on the veranda of the bar we drank at that evening, holding an impromptu wake. We speculated about what could have happened and why, but at that time we had very few details.

Sometimes, the drinking sessions that inevitably take place after someone is killed on ops – or even in training – turn into raucous, punchy affairs but this one didn't, even though it went on long into the tropical night. We were all still expecting to take off on our 'Death or Glory' suicide mission at any moment and the news of the helicopter crash had brought it all into sharp perspective.

In time we learned what had happened. A Sea King helicopter had been cross-decking men and stores from D and G Squadrons on a routine flight and had sucked a large seabird, probably an albatross, into the engine air intake. This led to a catastrophic loss of power and the helicopter fell into the icy sea. There was a war on, the chopper was overcrowded and none of the passengers was wearing an immersion suit, which might have kept some of them alive. A few got out and were rescued but 19 members of the Regiment died.

There's a story that one of the lads who did escape found that his foot was trapped in some part of the safety harness. As he struggled, he felt a tap on his ankle, then the motion of someone sawing through the webbing strap that was holding him; then he was loose and he felt a firm double tap on the ankle, and knew to swim free whist his rescuer went to the bottom of the ocean.

I don't remember ever being specifically told that *Plum Duff* had aborted but as the days passed, it was clear that something had gone wrong with the recce because we hadn't received any of the information we were expecting. Most of us in the squadron assumed that, with no eyes on the target, the operation would be cancelled but bizarrely it wasn't, and we continued to train for an attack which would be almost bound to fail for one of several reasons.

The point is that there were readily identifiable problems with every phase of Operation *Mikado*. The first of these was the entry phase. We were relying on two heavily loaded C-130s getting from Ascension Island to Rio Grande, a distance of around 4,000 miles, which would require air-to-air refuelling on route. However well-maintained the aircraft are, there is always the chance of a mechanical failure of some sort particularly when doing a complex manoeuvre like refuelling. At a certain stage we were going to reach a point of no return to Ascension, and if one of the C-130s had to divert and land in a neutral country, the other one would be on its own: would it press home the attack? The sensible answer would be to abort the op but our orders were to

press on.

Similarly, if one of the C-130s was shot down or severely damaged on the approach – a strong possibility if there was any kind of defence at Rio Grande – the other aircraft would be on its own.

The assault itself, once we'd hit the ground, relied on surprise, speed and slick drills, but as we didn't actually know where we had to go because we didn't know the detailed layout of the base, that wasn't going to happen. Even semi-competent defenders would be able to get their act together in time to respond, and remember, we would be very lightly armed: our heaviest weapons would be the .50 Browning machine guns on the pinkies but we had nothing else apart from small arms to suppress an Argie counter-attack. In short, it was a disaster waiting to happen and definitely squeaky bottom time. Why wasn't it cancelled? We didn't know but the suspicion in B Squadron was that DLB was desperate for it to go ahead for his own reasons. As we waited in Ascension, there was a lot of speculation about what these could be. DLB was back in the UK, presumably telling everyone how he was about to win the war. The operation had started badly back in the Blue Room: if DLB had been able to answer the basic, sensible questions he was asked, we might have had more confidence in the plan but he hadn't, and we didn't. The 'Chinese Parliaments'* were running at a high-octane level at this point and it's probably a good thing that DLB couldn't hear what we were saying about him: I bet his ears were burning. One theory was that B Squadron also needed to be seen to be taking casualties but what on earth would be the point of that?

* A 'Chinese Parliament' is the informal SAS practice of allowing every member of a patrol or operational sub-unit the chance to give their opinion on a proposed plan or course of action, and suggest alterations.

This state of affairs continued for several days, by which time part of the squadron had been loaded on to HMS *Onyx*, a diesel electric submarine capable of getting close in to the Argentine shore. The plan was for them to paddle ashore in rubber boats and infiltrate overland to support the attack. It was getting farcical.

On 23 May we finally heard that Operation *Mikado* was binned. Thank fuck for that. Morale in the squadron had been up and down like a yoyo as we basically planned and rehearsed our own deaths. As you can imagine, we had a few beers after we heard that news as well. We weren't toasting DLB's

health.

Even so, the war was still going on and we were halfway to the Falklands already. Some of the D and G Squadron lads had been ashore for the best part of a month and, with the best will in the world, those operations take it out of you. The time wasn’t far off when they would need to be relieved and B Squadron were well placed to do it, so it wasn’t time to go home just yet.

CHAPTER TWELVE
WATER JUMP

While we had been preparing for our suicide mission, the war in the Falklands had, of course, been continuing. As I mentioned earlier, D Squadron had got themselves hairily involved in the recapture of South Georgia which had started on 21 April with a failed helicopter insertion on a glacier, followed a couple of days later by a partially successful boat insertion. Meanwhile, the rest of the naval task force had continued to sail towards the Falkland Islands themselves, where they began to arrive on 30 April.

1 May was the first day that the two sides started seriously clashing. The Argentine Air Force began to attack the task force, without success at this point, and during the night, the RAF had launched their first Vulcan attack from Ascension Island, aimed at taking out the runway at Port Stanley airfield. This was followed by attacks during the day by Harriers from the task force.

But what nobody noticed during these early exchanges was that recce patrols from G Squadron were going ashore. Over three nights, G Squadron inserted eight four-man patrols to cover and report back from a series of key locations. In a sense this observation and intelligence gathering was a classic SAS role going back to World War II but it wasn't one we practised much in those days.

Long-term covert OPs were quite common in Northern Ireland but conditions were entirely different there. For a start, the weather in Ireland, while it could be pretty grim at times, was rarely as unrelentingly cold and miserable as it routinely was in the Falklands and most OPs, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas, could be inserted into buildings or other structures, while those in rural parts could often be concealed in woodland, which was non-existent in the Falkands. Secondly, we had developed sophisticated methods of covertly resupplying our observation posts to ensure that their occupants weren't short of food and water, and could be changed over as necessary to make sure that they got adequate rest. Thirdly, if an OP

was compromised, we were almost always in position to bring in a Quick Reaction Force to save the day and although that didn't always work out, anyone manning a covert OP had a reasonable expectation that they should have enough firepower to keep an enemy at bay until the cavalry arrived; that certainly wasn't going to be the case for the G Squadron guys who, for three long weeks, were essentially the only British troops ashore apart from a few teams from the Shaky Boats. If the shit hit the fan, they were going to be in trouble. In fact, even if they avoided detection, they were certain to be cold, wet, hungry and exhausted, living on cold food on hard routine.

D Squadron were tasked in the offensive action role. Their first major task after South Georgia was a recce followed by a raid at an Argentine airfield on Pebble Island off the coast of West Falkland where the enemy had located an outstation next to the airstrip used by the civilian population. There was a concern that the Argentines had put a radar there which would help vector Argentine aircraft onto the task force when they approached the islands so, on 11 May, D Squadron patrols were sent out to take a look at the airfield. When they got there they were able to observe 11 mixed enemy aircraft and called this in, and a raid, featuring the rest of D Squadron, was quickly jacked up and brought in on the night of 14 May. All the aircraft were destroyed.

By now, the main landing force had sailed south from Ascension Island – which we knew because we'd seen them go – and tension was running high. Following the loss of the *Sheffield*, all eyes were on the Exocet threat – which is where we came in with *Mikado* – but at the same time there was a need to deal with potential threats to the landing force as they came ashore.

The plan that was being developed by 3 Commando Brigade was for a landing on the western side of East Falkland, at the northern end of the Falklands Sound, the channel between the two main islands. Two known Argentine positions potentially threatened this: Port Howard, on West Falkland, and a garrison at Darwin-Goose Green which was about 20 miles to the south of the selected landing site at San Carlos. Both of these were being observed by G Squadron OPs but these would certainly not be able to prevent the Darwin-Goose Green garrison, at least, from moving to interfere with the landings when they took place. As a result a plan was made to use D Squadron to mount a diversionary attack against Goose Green to fix them in place.

Before this could happen, the devastating helicopter crash of 19 May took place, killing the squadron sergeant majors of both D and G Squadrons, six

other senior NCOs and 12 others, most of whom were badged members of the Regiment. Even so, the diversion still needed to happen and most of the surviving members of D Squadron were tasked to take part in it.

The landings actually came during the early hours of 21 May, while we were still sitting on Ascension, and D Squadron's raid at Goose Green took place the evening before, as they brassed up positions around Goose Green with everything from small arms to Milan anti-tank missiles. Meanwhile, back on Ascension Island, things were once again afoot for us in B Squadron.

With *Mikado* cancelled, the choice was between sending us back to Hereford or finding a role for us down south. With Major C now in command of the squadron, it was always likely that he would push for an active tasking for us, and that's what happened.

The decision was made: B Squadron would join the task force to reinforce the Special Forces effort. Some of the G Squadron OPs had been in place for several weeks and would need relief, and both D and G Squadrons needed to replace men lost in the terrible Sea King crash. That was more like it: morale was now right back where it should be, and there was a real buzz about B Squadron.

The plan was to fly us down to the 'exclusion zone' in the two C-130s we would have used for *Mikado*, and then to parachute us and our equipment into the ocean for pick-up by ships of the task force. This time, however, we wouldn't need to take the vehicles.

The next couple of days were spent getting the equipment prepared. We needed to get everything crated and palletised so that it could be dropped safely into the sea and recovered intact. Each of us was taking a bergan loaded down with our operational equipment, a belt kit and ammunition, a para bag for our personal gear and, in most cases, two or three weapons. Additionally, there were various squadron stores to take along.

With the equipment loaded onto the aircraft, there wasn't a lot of space to get comfortable. On my flight we had squadron headquarters and half of B Squadron, about 30 SAS in all, but we also had the air despatchers from the Royal Corps of Transport who were responsible for dropping the equipment and Des, the RAF parachute jump instructor, whose job would be to make sure we exited the aircraft safely. Most of the space inside was taken up by the big heavy drop pallets which our kit was lashed to and so, after we'd taken off, I found myself a space on top of one of these and tried to get my head down for some sleep. It wasn't particularly comfortable but at least

there was some room.

It was a long flight and twice I watched in awe as the huge Victor tanker aircraft manoeuvred alongside and then in front to refuel us. I can honestly say that it is quite a sight! Somewhere along the way, word was passed to us that the other C-130 had a mechanical problem and was turning back. As usual, things were not going to plan.

About an hour out from the drop zone (DZ), I struggled into my bulky black immersion suit, worn over my uniform, and began to mentally get my shit together. The air despatch guys also seemed to have woken up at about the same time – which struck me then as being a bit late – and were scampering about rigging the pallets for the drop. I noticed that they were using very small 'D' type shackles to secure the parachutes and I was concerned enough to grab one of the air despatch NCOs to ask him, 'Those boxes are really heavy, will those shackles hold them?'

'They'll have to, mate,' he responded. 'They're all we got.'

That wasn't very reassuring, but I assumed they knew what they were doing.

Des the parachute jump instructor was now moving around, telling the lads to start getting their parachutes on; he was trying to be Mr Efficiency but inevitably the guys were fucking around and taking the piss out of him; he was a good bloke but, at the end of the day, a Crab* and therefore fair game. I visually inspected my main chute and then my reserve, and when I was happy I climbed into the harness and clipped my reserve on. Working in pairs, I checked over Bob's parachute and harness, and he checked mine. Sorted. Word went round that we should expect 15-foot waves when we hit the water and I remember thinking: *I hope whoever is picking us up is on the ball*.

* Crab = a member of the Royal Air Force.

The idea was that the aircraft would make a series of passes over the DZ and each stick of six or eight blokes would then push their pallet – which was on a roller system – over the rear ramp and follow it straight out; the quicker we got us and the equipment out, the closer together we would land. Down below, there would be small boats manned by Royal Navy and merchant seamen who would be waiting to fish us out of the water.

Twenty minutes out from the DZ, the air despatchers were still farting around getting the equipment rigged and I felt a stab of annoyance at their lack of professionalism. This was probably the most important operation any

of them had taken part in and they had cocked up by oversleeping. We were a couple of thousand feet up and slowly descending to a jump altitude of about 1,000 feet. I looked around at the rest of 8 Troop and thought *I wonder where we'll be in an hour from now*. It's strange what you think about at moments of tension.

We were sitting down now in our sticks of six or eight on either side of the aircraft. Outside it was cloudy and intermittently snowing. Des told us to stand up and hook up our static lines. The rear ramp of the C-130 opened and we could see the ocean below, with wild-looking white-capped waves. We were now on the final run in and Des positioned himself by the tail ramp, ready to despatch the first stick of six from squadron headquarters. The red light came on: standby. Then green came on: go! The first stick pushed their boxes out but, as they prepared to follow, we saw the parachute canopies part company from the pallets. The crappy little shackles had snapped like twigs. The parachutes blew away like plastic bags caught by the wind while the carefully packed pallets of equipment screamed the thousand feet down to the sea, burst apart on impact and their mangled contents sank to the ocean floor. Fucking great! There was nothing to be done now, so the guys followed the boxes out and we saw their parachutes open properly.

The air despatch guys were white-faced. This was a big-time fuck up. The C-130 came around for its next pass and the same thing happened. The parachutes immediately came away from the pallets and the equipment ploughed straight into the sea.

I was first out in the third stick and behind me were Bob and Gonzo but as we made the run in, there was a problem. I looked round and saw Bob and Gonzo shouting towards each other. I looked up and unhooked Bob's line and my line and changed them over so Bob was in front of me. Then it was red light on; green on. We pushed our boxes out and they followed the others to the bottom of the sea. *Shit.* Then it was us. I shouted to Gonzo to push me out and I pushed Bob. As we went past Des, I was laughing loudly and Bob shouted something at him; Des just looked confused.

Outside the aircraft it was every man for himself. I checked that my canopy was flying correctly and when I could see it was, I unclipped my reserve and threw it away so that it fell into the sea. I had a brief sight of the ocean, with ships dotted around beneath us, then I was in a cloud surrounded by snow. I came out of the cloud much lower down and again I could see ships but also the huge waves and the grey, freezing-looking sea. I inflated my lifejacket

just before I hit the water. I had no idea where anyone else was, all I could see was the waves as I bobbed up and down. The shock of the icy water on my face and hands was numbing but I was just about able to take my parachute harness off. I held onto it, though if it had started to drag me I would have let it go. I didn't look up to see where the aircraft was or to watch out for any boxes hurtling down to splatter me; I was totally focused on trying to spot someone coming to rescue me.

I realised that I needed a piss so I just let it go in my immersion suit which made me feel nice and warm for a while. Lying on my back, looking up at the waves, I couldn't see anybody and I began to worry that they'd missed me but suddenly, there was a big guy with a knife in front of me. It was a merchant seaman in a Gemini inflatable. He grabbed my immersion suit and rammed the knife into my life jacket, then hauled me into the boat. Thank fuck for that.

'Cold is it, mate?' he asked.

'It's fucking freezing.'

'Never mind, soon be roasty-toasty.'

'Thanks for rescuing me,' I told him, and meant it.

'No problems.'

We took off for the mother ship, HMS *Andromeda*, without seeing anyone else from B Squadron. There was a scramble net hung over the side of the ship and as I climbed it, my rescuer took off to look for the others. I reached the deck of the ship with my hands and face freezing, and looked back to see a horde of small boats criss-crossing the DZ, looking for the rest of B Squadron.

When we were all accounted for, we were taken down to one of the mess decks and told that they had managed to recover some of the kit and that we should look through it to see if any of it was ours. As it happened my para bag had survived so, apart from the piss-soaked uniform I was standing up in, I had a tracksuit, a pair of trainers and some civilian clothes. Not a lot of use. All of my operational kit, my ammunition and my three weapons were at the bottom of the sea. Pretty well everyone else was in the same boat, so to speak.

Everyone in the squadron was seething. Most of our kit had been carefully assembled and personalised over several years so we were completely comfortable with it, and now it had been lost thanks to the incompetence of the air despatchers. My view, for what it is worth, is that they should have

been court-martialled for neglect of duty, the unprofessional wankers. In the meantime we were issued a set of clothing to wear, a white jumper, blue trousers, socks, pants and a vest, and given a good hot meal courtesy of the navy chefs. That evening, we had a get together in the senior ratings mess, and over the next few days we made ourselves at home. The navy looked after us well and I could have no complaints on that score.

After a few days on HMS *Andromeda*, we were cross-decked to a kind of hybrid navy/ cargo vessel, the RFA *Fort Austin*, which was acting as a mother ship for SAS operations. The ship had suffered a near miss from an Argentine bomb in San Carlos water not long after the landings and had a few holes in it but was otherwise in reasonable shape. The problem we now faced was that we had virtually no kit apart from what we stood up in. This was partly resolved by borrowing weapons and kit from members of G Squadron, when they began to arrive back from their patrols after ground forces got to their positions and 'relieved' them, but we were still seriously under-equipped.

We'd arrived on the *Fort Austin* on about 25 May and by then, things were beginning to happen with the land campaign. On the 27th, 2 Para headed off towards Darwin and Goose Green for their attack there, and on the same evening the rest of 3 Commando Brigade began to move out on foot in the general direction of Port Stanley.

Meanwhile, we could do nothing and we spent a lot of time hanging around waiting whilst the head shed decided how to equip us and where to send us. We were in sight of land and I couldn't really understand why we weren't just put ashore; instead, we stayed put on what we all suspected was a rather large Exocet target.

We spent a lot of time playing cards with the crew, many of whom were Hong Kong Chinese, and as time went by, quite a bit of money began to change hands. Most of us had been pretty much skint when we'd first boarded the ship but as time went by a few of us accumulated quite a tidy amount. I certainly did.

The Battle of Goose Green came and went. By 30 May, 3 Commando Brigade were well established less than 25 miles from Port Stanley and on 1 June, 5 Infantry Brigade arrived to join the fight, while we stayed stuck aboard our ship. On the night of 11 June the final battle began, as 3 Para seized Mount Longdon and the Commandos took Two Sisters and Mount Harriet, but it wasn't until the next day that we finally went ashore with a

definite mission.

We were flown ashore to an RV near Mount Kent and given the mission of infiltrating overnight towards the airstrip at Stanley to RV with G Squadron patrols and take over their observation role until the end of the war. What we hadn't quite appreciated was that it was pretty much endex. On 14 June, as we watched the airfield, it slowly filled with Argentine soldiers. Word came through over the radio that they had surrendered and that the Union Jack was flying over Stanley. Well fuck me! The Commanding Officer and a Marines officer who spoke Spanish had spent the previous day negotiating the Argentine surrender and they had jacked their hand in, lock, stock and barrel.

With hostilities over we headed for the airfield and, by the time we got there, there were thousands of Argie soldiers and the place was strewn with abandoned weapons in piles five or six feet deep. Looking at the Argentinians, it occurred to me that if one of them was to get antsy at the present of a tiny handful of British soldiers, it could all get very nasty indeed, but nothing happened.

For a professional SAS NCO of five years' standing, the next move was SOP: get some souvenirs! The lads and I walked over to a line of Pucara ground attack aircraft and started poking about. I managed to open the canopy of one without setting off the ejector seat and had a poke about inside, where I found a nice semi-auto pistol which I grabbed. It wasn't much use to me but I thought it would make a nice presentation piece for the mess on HMS *Andromeda*. I had the patrol camera with me so I took some pictures of the prisoners, the aircraft and other bits and pieces, then we made our way into Port Stanley where we were being accommodated.

The thousands of Argentine soldiers being marched out to the airfield were a sorry sight. They genuinely looked defeated; none of them were cracking jokes or laughing which is what I'd have expected from Brits in the same situation. There was no fight in them at all; they'd clearly given up some time ago. On the other hand, the Falkland Islanders themselves were almost dancing with joy that they were back under British rule.

In Stanley we got the good news: they were planning to get the airfield operational as soon as possible and start moving us back to the UK, and we were near the top of the priority list. Thank fuck the RAF had failed to do any meaningful damage with their Vulcan raids!

So in the end, I'd have to say that the Falklands War ended up as a bit of an anti-climax. For much of it, I was convinced I was going to end up very

dead somewhere around a small airfield in Tierra del Fuego. When that was called off, I found myself taking part in one of the first operational SAS parachute jumps since the 1960s – and definitely the first one into the sea. But finally, I'd been a spectator at the final surrender and had managed to get through the whole war without firing a single shot in anger.

There was a lot of criticism in the Regiment afterwards about how our part in the war had been handled. Firstly, was it really necessary to deploy three squadrons into what amounted to a tiny area? The infantry and Commando units who did the bulk of the real fighting complained that very little of the information collected by our patrols ever got to them in a usable form. They also claimed that the sheer number of Special Forces out there – the SBS were there too – got in their way and hindered their ability to do their own reconnaissance effectively. You had SAS, SBS, the Marines' Arctic Warfare Cadre who acted as the brigade recce force, the patrols companies of the Para battalions and the recce troops and platoons of the Commandos and infantry all trying to do their stuff in a restricted area which is not a recipe for success.

There was also criticism of the roles we were given. The G Squadron intelligence-gathering OPs were clearly a good idea, or would have been if their information had been properly distributed, but with the exception of the Pebble Island raid, it's much less clear cut what D Squadron really achieved and on two occasions they had to be pulled out of the shit they'd got themselves into: once on South Georgia and again at the very end of the war when they launched a raid close to Port Stanley which went wrong. As for Operation *Mikado*, there was a strong implication that the massive risks it involved were justified because it was critical for the survival of the task force but it's an undeniable fact that we didn't do it and the task force survived; so it wasn't that critical then.

After two nights in Stanley we headed back to the airfield to catch a C-130 flight back to Ascension. We'd been told that we should be home in less than 24 hours and that sounded good to me. I reckoned that my wife Alison probably hadn't noticed I'd gone, that Mark being still only three and a half months old wouldn't have missed me much either but Sabre, my German Shepherd, was sure to give me a warm welcome: he would have been missing our ten-mile runs in the Herefordshire countryside.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BACK TO WORK

1982–85

Coming back from the Falklands there was an air of disappointment around B Squadron. We'd gone down south to fight a war but the best that any of us had managed was watching the Argentine garrison fling down their weapons and quit. Meanwhile, we'd lost our squadron commander, sacked by Brigadier de la Billière, and were still being led by Major C who was supposed to be second-in-command of the Regiment as a whole.

And, of course, the Regiment as a whole had suffered its greatest loss since World War II. There were funerals and wakes to attend while we went about the mundane business of sorting out kit and identifying what had been lost when our squadron and personal gear had been so carelessly dropped into the South Atlantic. For most of us, this meant replacing more or less every useful piece of combat kit and clothing we had accumulated over years of service.

But life has to go on. The Falklands War was over but the world was no more peaceful. The IRA were still on the rampage in Northern Ireland, international terrorism had not gone away, Iran and Iraq were at each other's throats in the Middle East and looming against it all was the Cold War, which was still in full swing in Europe and across the world. Which meant we had to resume our routine of training and deployments.

I'd been back a few weeks when I was summoned to the squadron office to be told that I was being put on the Counter Revolutionary Warfare Wing's 'VIP protection and bodyguarding' course. Well, that cheered me up. Of all the courses the Regiment has to offer, this one is the most sought after by SAS soldiers. The reasons are purely mercenary. There was, is and always will be a well-paid future on the private security circuit for soldiers leaving the Regiment but this is one of the best qualifications you can have to persuade private security companies to take an interest in you. I was no different to anyone else in the Regiment. I knew my soldiering career

couldn’t last for ever and I’d heard all the stories about life after the SAS. For the right man there were good jobs, paying excellent money and working for great employers: basically, the world was your oyster. When I hung up my boots, I wanted some of that.

The course itself was six weeks, and like most of the other training we did, it was very intense, with long days and more than a few nights too. There was quite a lot of theoretical material to assimilate but lots of practical hands-on stuff too, and that’s what I really enjoyed. In the early part of the course, the different skills were broken down into their component parts, so we did a lot of medical training, ‘dry’ weapon training, vehicle escort drills, foot drills, anti-ambush drills and the like. Every morning there would be a written test on what we learned in the days before and then, as the course went on, we began to put it all together in a series of exercises. There were 12 of us on the course and by the end we were functioning as a team and were able to fulfil the course requirement, which was to provide a well drilled three-car protection team. At that time, the normal form was a one- or two-car protection detail which we regarded as a low-to-medium level of security. With an eye on the future, I put a lot of effort into the course and was pleased to receive one of the two ‘A’ grades which were given out on this particular course.

After the close protection training, the next course was a complete change. B Squadron was due to deploy to Oman to take part in Exercise Sandy Wanderer and, as one of the patrol medics, it would be my job to provide medical care in some of the remote villages and Bedouin camps we would visit, as part of our ‘hearts and minds’ role. Consequently I needed to be able to communicate with the locals. The powers that be in B Squadron decided that what I needed was to do a colloquial Arabic course.

I had mixed feelings about this. I’m not the most academically minded individual and I knew it was going to be three months of really hard work. On the other hand, the Regiment had two education officers specifically there to teach languages so I wouldn’t have to go to the Army School of Languages at Beaconsfield, which meant I should get three months living at home with my wife and son.

I wasn’t wrong about the hard work. The course was Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 5pm every day. In the evenings we got homework, mostly revising what we’d learned that day and learning new vocabulary for the next day – often 50 or 60 new words at a time – so it was easily 12 hours hard work a

day. What worried me was that if I fell behind on the course, I wasn't clever enough to catch up, so I really needed to put my nose to the grindstone.

I tried to strike a balance between family and work during this time. I wanted to put weekends aside for my son but my routine every day didn't allow much time for the family on weekdays. I would get home around 6pm for supper and would have time to see Mark and to take Sabre for a walk, but then I would have to lock myself away to do my homework and this really pissed Alison off. She was constantly on my back about everything and it seemed I could do nothing right. I could see her point of view, of course, but I was a professional soldier and this was what I had to do.

You really needed a sense of humour plus to get through these courses. I didn't find learning words particularly difficult but the grammar was something else. I also knew, because there were some really fluent Arabic speakers in the squadron, that I still might not be able to communicate with the Omanis as there are so many different Arabic dialects. Even so, I persevered with it and managed to pass, which pleased me no end although it was undoubtedly a relief to get it finished. I had to take my hat off to the education officers: some of these guys could speak 11 languages fluently. Having said that, if they'd had to strip down a machine gun and name the parts, they'd have been fucked.

So as a newly qualified colloquial Arabist, I deployed out to Oman with the squadron. This was where, a decade before, 12 members of B Squadron had held off around 300 Communist 'Adoo' in the seaside town of Mirbat. My friends Snapper and Tak had both been there, and Tak had been awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal – the second highest award in the British Armed Forces – for his part in the action, firing an old 25-pounder at the enemy despite severe wounds.

Over the coming weeks, we would take part in a multi-phase training and exercise programme which would bring our individual and troop skills up to speed in the desert environment. As usual, I was really looking forward to it.

The first phase of the exercise for 8 Troop involved desert patrolling in our pinkies in conjunction with the Baluchi soldiers who manned the Omani Army, and carrying out SOP training with them. When we came across the tiny villages that were dotted around the desert, it was a chance to put my medical training and colloquial Arabic into action and do some 'hearts and minds' work. In one village we got to, there was an old Arab guy who looked really sick. I couldn't make head nor tail of what he was saying but our

linguist eventually found out that the problem was toothache! I laid the guy across the front seats of the pinkie and got him to open up. His teeth looked like a row of burnt out derelict houses. I looked up at DJ who started laughing and, try as I might, I couldn't help but join in. The guy's breath was appalling but I got the tools of the trade out and had a bit of a poke about around the infected tooth. I thought to myself: *If I try to take his tooth out, it's going to disintegrate and he'll be in an even worse state than he is now. Better leave it where it is*. Instead, I gave him some painkillers – which have an almost magic effect on people who've never had them before – and we quickly moved on.

One of the great joys of training in Oman is that there is a lot of empty desert and the country isn't short of a bob or two to fund training exercises. This gave us the opportunity to do some 'forward air controller' (FAC) training, bringing in Strikemaster jets from the Sultan of Oman's Air Force on live firing missions against targets out in the desert. After we'd been doing this a while, I got to meet some of the Rhodesian contract pilots who flew for the Sultan. These guys were about as laid back as anyone I've ever met and one of them took me up and gave me a chance to fly his aircraft while he sat in the back, map reading. The only ground training he gave me was to point out the handle of the ejection seat:

'If you hear me shout eject,' he told me, 'pull that handle really hard, because I'm not going to be around to shout it a second time.'

He took us off and then he handed the controls over to me and we flew around over the hills and coast, and he even let me do a live firing strafing run against the targets we'd been using during the FAC training: fantastic. Before we returned to the airfield, he took the controls and took me on a low pass over the Fort at Mirbat.

Another troop exercise involved taking all our general purpose machine guns out onto a desert range to practise firing from the vehicles, shooting from the hip, fixed line sustained-fire shoots and a night shoot which lit up the desert sky with tracer.

For most of the training we were based with the squadron at Thumrait Camp. It was hot and dusty but we had good accommodation and our own bar, which even had a snooker table where Johnny Mac, DJ, Stu McVicar and I would have a beer and shoot a couple of frames at the end of the day.

As the training came to an end, we had the inevitable series of piss-ups to let off steam. The first of these was at the 'goat farm' where the Sultan of

Oman's Special Force officers mess was based. A lot of their officers were ex-22 SAS guys serving on contract and between us we knew most of them. They introduced us to a drink called the 'Big Boys' Milkshake'. God knows what was in it but it was remarkably easy to drink and did a very efficient job of getting us drunk. A coach had been organised for a sightseeing trip to Mirbat but most of the guys who made it aboard promptly fell asleep and the tour wasn't a success.

The best was yet to come, however. The final party was a posh affair at the British Embassy which was at a beautiful location down on the seafront in Muscat. B Squadron were there, the Rhodesian pilots, some nurses and a number of dignitaries, including the ambassador himself.

Booze flowed freely and quite soon a couple of the lads had quietly conked out in deckchairs on the lawn. We decided to pick up Mel, who was one of these, and gently carried him down to the sea, where we carefully put him down in water up to his chest. Not surprisingly, he suddenly woke up, fighting mad, and began racing back towards the party guests, soaking wet. It took several of the lads to hold him back and calm him down before any damage was done.

As the evening continued, more and more of the guys were becoming the worse for wear and eventually a couple of beer cans were thrown in the general direction of the nurses, which didn't please them at all. The grand finale came when it was already getting dark. One of the guys, who shall remain nameless, felt nature calling and in his inebriated state decided that he would slip away into the bushes for a quick shit. This was bad enough but someone decided to switch on the lights and our lone hero was then floodlit, squatting on the Embassy lawn taking a dump for all to see. The guy in question was a senior NCO and he was quickly RTU'd back to his unit for 12 months, and had to retake part of selection before he was allowed to rejoin the Regiment.

Towards the end of 1982 we moved back into the counter-terrorist team role for the first time since we had done the Iranian Embassy Siege in 1980. I volunteered for the assault team in the hope that we might get another opportunity to practise our art but sadly lightning rarely strikes in the same place twice and we weren't called on. What we did do was spend endless hours in the Killing House, shooting hundreds of rounds into 'Carlos the Jackal' targets almost daily. This was interspersed with 'options' training on trains, ships, aircraft and even the BT Tower, should terrorists decide to strike

at the British mainland again.

One part of the role was putting on demonstrations for VIP visitors. Partly this was just showing off our capability but it also had a serious purpose. Some of the visitors were prime kidnapping targets and we needed to familiarise them with what would happen when we came to rescue them.

At the back end of 1982, Prince Charles and Princess Diana came down for a visit and we put on a full demonstration for them at our training area. I was given the job of looking after Princess Diana and spent much of the day shepherding her around, whilst dressed in my assault gear and carrying a full complement of weapons and live ammunition.

The demonstration we were putting on was a building assault from three Range Rovers equipped with ladders. The guys would de-bus, scale the ladders, get inside the building and free the hostages inside. When we'd explained this, Princess Diana asked if she could drive one of the Range Rovers: well, how could I say no?

The exercise started and the three vehicles roared up to the building, with Princess Diana at the wheel of one of them. The guys de-bussed and the assault started. Unfortunately, Princess Di hadn't fully closed her driver's side window, and when the flash-bangs started to go off one of the little pellets – which we call screamers – came back through the window and stuck in her hair. Now these things are hot and as I watched, I could see her hair was catching fire. *Shit!* I quickly brushed it away and started patting at her hair to stop it burning. *Whoops!*

The assault continued and during the debrief at the end, Princess Diana thanked me for my quick reactions. Prince Charles and his entourage were laughing their heads off.

A second royal visit in the New Year of 1983 was from Princess Anne and again, Mr Charming was assigned to look after her during the demonstration. On this occasion we didn't manage to set our visitor on fire but she did enjoy what she had seen.

After we'd handed over the counter-terrorist role in early 1983, our next deployment was for a squadron exercise in Cyprus. Officer Commanding B Squadron by then was Major L, who was originally from one of the Scottish infantry regiments. He was one of the best squadron commanders I came across: a real no-nonsense guy who got on well with everyone but wasn't afraid to put his stamp on things. His bravery can be gauged by the fact that he invited the whole squadron to his wedding: that took real guts!

The plan for the exercise was fairly straightforward. We would spend a few weeks doing our own troop training at the big training area on the Akamus peninsula in the west of Cyprus, then afterwards we would do some cross-training in other troop skills, so some of us would do amphibious work with the Boat Troop, some would do some free-falling with the Air Troop, some would go climbing with the Mountain Troop and some would do vehicle work with Mobility Troop.

The first part of the training went fine and I then volunteered to go diving with 6 Troop, which was something I'd always fancied. My instructor for this was Snapper, aka 'Soldier I', who had started off in 8 Troop but had been RTU'd for a year after getting convicted for brawling in Hong Kong and receiving six of the best with a cane as punishment. On his return from a year's exile with the Royal Engineers, he had been reassigned to 6 Troop and had retrained in Boat Troop skills.

Snapper took me, the complete diving novice, off to one side and helped me get into my wetsuit and flippers, weight belt and air tank; then he showed me how to clear my mask and explained that we were going to do a simple swim, playing follow the leader behind him. We hopped off the boat and straight into the sea and I just followed on after Snapper as we steadily descended. We'd got to about 40 feet down when I began to realise I wasn't getting any air. I made a few panicky gestures at Snapper, then dropped my weight belt and shot straight to the surface.

Snapper came up right behind me.

'What the fuck are you doing, Rusty?'

'I couldn't breathe,' I told him.

'Ha, I got you there, didn't I?' he said, 'You didn't equalise your tanks.'

'What the fuck are you talking about: equalise my tanks? Nobody told me I had to do that.'

He half apologised and explained how to equalise the tanks so I could get air and we went back in. Was I frightened? Not really, but mainly because I didn't have time to be: as soon as I couldn't breathe I got the hell out of there.

Our next activity was a couple of squadron parachute jumps. The first of these was to be a water jump which is usually a bit of fun, and dressed in wetsuits, trainers and winning smiles we took off in a C-130 from Akrotiri. The idea was that the 40 or so of us would jump out in sticks of four to six from the aircraft as it made repeated passes a mile or so off one of the tourist beaches, and we would then be picked up in Gemini inflatables. No problem.

We circled around for a bit and then got ready for our jumps.

Major L and the squadron headquarters team were to be first out and as they stood up to hook up, I couldn't help but notice the aggressive-looking knife on Major L's hip: he was really looking the part. The red light came on, then the green, and they were off! As the aircraft circled for another pass, we spotted that Major L and squadron headquarters had actually managed to miss the sea and had landed on the beach amongst the spectators. Well that was embarrassing – for them anyway. The rest of us managed to hit the water where we were supposed to.

The second jump was a land jump onto a rock-hard drop zone, which made it interesting. We jumped in military kit with weapons, and afterwards Fred Marafono showed me the massive bruise he got when the butt of his SLR got jammed up into his armpit. *Ouch*.

I had my own problems. Ginger J was in my stick and at around 600 feet I couldn't help but notice that he was colliding with my canopy. It was like a cartoon in that I could see his face and the palms of his hands pushing through the nylon but there was nothing I could do other than try to steer away. Even so, whatever I did, Ginger seemed to keep on following me. In the end we both landed fairly heavily but OK. No damage was done.

Towards the end of the training, a few of us decided to go out for a beer and Barry the storeman, who was attached to the squadron from the Royal Green Jackets, offered to drive and didn't mind not drinking. We had the usual army white minibus which took us from Bloodhound Camp into the local city of Limassol and got set about the beer.

We hadn't been there long when we noticed that there were some other Brits in the same bar as us. They were obviously officers from the way they were dressed, in blazers, shirts and ties, and some stealthy reconnaissance suggested that they were the Red Arrows display team. The little red Hawk aircraft tiepins they all wore were a dead giveaway.

They may have been the elite of the RAF but we were the SAS and after quite a number of beers and a few flaming Drambuies (top tip: throw it down quickly and it goes out; sip it and you get third degree burns on your face) I asked one of them what darts team they were from. This led to some banter and after more beers and more flaming Drambuies, we decided to move on. Barry found us another bar, and this was a bit less friendly.

It took a while to realise it but these guys didn't like us. The whole Cyprus insurgency had passed me by when I was a kid in Carlisle in the early 1960s

but there were plenty of people out in Cyprus who really hated the British Army and all its manifestations. It didn't bother us, we just carried on drinking, but there was an atmosphere which I couldn't put my finger on and my hackles were slowly but surely rising.

There was one particular guy who wouldn't look at us. I'd spotted him but he hadn't seen me. I was switched on enough at this point to ease back on the alcohol and I watched as he followed Fred Marafono into the toilets. It didn't look good. I went after him and Bobby C followed me.

Fred was standing at one of the urinals taking a piss and as he did this, I saw the Cypriot take a knife from his pocket. I didn't hesitate; I hit the guy as hard as I could and he went down, face first into the piss trough. The knife skidded to a halt by one of the toilets.

Fred was finished and shaking off in a bemused way when I told him, 'We need to leave here now!' We moved out quickly into the bar and I grabbed the guys: 'This place is trouble. We've got to go.'

We trusted each other enough for this to be an effective warning and we bundled ourselves out of the bar, jumping into the minibus laughing and joking.

Even so, on the way back, emotions were running high. We had two Bobby Cs in the Troop and for some reason they were at each other's throats. As we headed back to camp, it all kicked off and they were throwing punches. Tak was the senior NCO and as he turned round to say something, he got a stray boot to the side of the face. It wasn't a good move. The rest of us tried to wind things down but back at camp it kicked off again in our tent, only finishing when one of the combatants took off for the rest of the night.

At the end of the training, we had a rugby match against the local Royal Military Police unit at Happy Valley in Episkopi. We had quite a good team then so that wasn't a worry but Kempy, the squadron sergeant major, was concerned that we would misbehave in their mess and gave us all a good talking to beforehand, reminding us that there would be wives and kids there for the inevitable curry lunch and beer after the game. It came as a slight surprise when, after a few beers had gone down, we saw Kempy doing handstands against the wall of the bar with his backside hanging out. We didn't let him forget that.

Our next major training exercise was in Botswana. This was supposed to be a deployment to reassure the Botswanan government that we were their friends and would support them in the event of any difficulties with their

neighbours, so we had to keep a fairly low profile. The aim of the exercise was to conduct jungle patrolling, recces and finally an assault on an enemy location, but we were also testing some new 110 Landrovers which were being introduced to replace the old pinkies, and also trialling some quad bikes to see whether they might have any operational role in the future.

The quad bikes turned out to be a lot of fun for racing around in the thick African bush but they weren't much more than toys and we ended up giving them the thumbs down. Our Can-Am motorbikes also caused problems in the rough terrain: they were very unreliable and needed far too many spares to keep them going. We also found that you couldn't go for long in the bush without stopping to take the huge thorns out of our bodies.

The new Landrovers weren't ideal either, certainly in comparison to the old pinkies. We discovered that they were very prone to getting their radiators punctured by the thick scrub and it was decided they needed serious modification to toughen them up before we could take them into operational use.

The final part of the exercise took place in the dense jungle around the Okavango River and each troop had its own role to play. My patrol of four were making for an RV in order to get into position for the final attack when we reached the river just after midnight. The river looked huge in the moonlight and we spent some time trying to find a useable crossing point. We were on foot and we could see that we were going to have to try to wade it. The problem was that we could hear the unmistakeable sound of hippopotamuses splashing around in the river nearby and they aren't good news. Hippos are big strong bastards and they'll go for you without batting an eyelid if you get too close to them. Another thought occurred to me: what about crocodiles?

Now don't get me wrong, the SAS is full of brave, well motivated guys but, to be honest, none of us fancied getting eaten by a croc. We got down into cover and I decided to hold a 'Chinese Parliament' to work out the best and safest way to get across. This is a normal process in the Regiment where you have all kinds of different experience within a patrol: the commander, in this case me, might not necessarily know the best way to do something but one of the others might.

In this case, nobody had any particularly good ideas. The river was at least 60 yards across and we couldn't see a safe way of crossing. *Shit.* At this point something quite bizarre happened. As we sat in cover, we heard the sound of

somebody singing loudly and out of tune. We sat and observed as a local man, who appeared to be drunk, out of his mind or high on drugs walked up to a point on the riverbank and, without hesitating, splashed into the river and waded across, still singing lustily. It's fair to say we all felt a bit shamefaced at this: if a local drunk isn't afraid to cross the river, then the big tough SAS shouldn't have much of an issue either. We followed him over, tactically of course, one at a time and covering each other's crossings from the bank.

While we heard a lot of splashing about from the hippos, they didn't come close to us and we didn't have any problem with them. This wasn't the case for everyone. One patrol, which was infiltrating in Gemini inflatable boats, got too close and wound up having the engine off the back end of their boats bitten off; fortunately nobody was injured.

With the exercise completed we headed back to our camp, which was just outside Gaborone, for a few days of packing up and some R and R. When we got there, Mink and I were told that one of the parents of one of the Signallers had died and that he and I were to drive him to the international airport in Johannesburg in next door South Africa so that he could catch a flight home for the funeral. The idea was that we would do the whole trip in a day.

In fact, after we'd dropped the guy off at the airport, we learned that the land border between South Africa and Botswana closed at 8pm and we realised that we weren't going to make it in time. Instead we checked into the Holiday Inn at the airport and spent the evening drinking in the disco there.

The next day we drove back to Botswana uneventfully and were back in time for the squadron 'end-of-exercise' party. This was a typical B Squadron affair. Someone had made punch with the G10 issue dark navy rum and crates of beer had been brought in whilst the barbecue got fired up. What could go wrong? Well, this. Sometime late in the evening one of the guys in 6 Troop, Andy, an ex-Para, decided to throw a thunderflash over the roof of one of the buildings. Of course it went off with a loud bang, as they do. For some reason this really annoyed Major P, who had taken over from Major L as Officer Commanding B Squadron, and all of a sudden he and Kempy stopped the party in its tracks while he attempted to find out who the culprit was.

This produced a stand-off. Andy wasn't going to own up and potentially get himself RTU'd and his mates weren't going to grass on him. The issue was partly that Major P wasn't particularly well liked in the squadron – of all the squadron commanders I served with he was, in my opinion, the worst –

but also that it just didn't seem that important. We were miles from anywhere: it was hardly drawing attention to us. Anyway, that was the end of the party and we were all sent to bed like naughty schoolboys.

Next morning, the squadron was paraded and, once again, we were asked to name the person who had let off the thunderflash. Nobody owned up and, in consequence, Major P decided to confine us all to camp. I wasn't particularly affected by this but quite a few of the guys had booked and paid for a two-day safari in the local area and they all lost their money, which put a big damper on the whole deployment.

After the fun and games in Botswana, it was time for B Squadron to prepare for another tour in Northern Ireland. Our accommodation wasn't particularly great but it was all liveable-in and, as usual, we had our own bar for socialising.

Within a couple of days of our arrival I was walking through the barracks when I bumped into one of the senior NCOs from 7 Troop. He was a bit flustered because he'd been due to take his HGV 1 test that morning but something had come up and he wasn't going to be able to make it, and the QTO was already on his way over. He had a sudden brainwave:

'Rusty, you work all the time with vehicles in Mobility Troop: you take it!'

I thought about this for a moment. I hadn't actually driven an HGV for a while but I reckoned I could do it.

'Yeah, all right.'

When the QTO showed up I was introduced to him and we went into the bar to sort out the paperwork, then went out for the test.

'So, how do you think you did?' the QTO asked me.

'I reckon I did OK,' I told him.

'Yes, you passed. Well done.' And that was that; out of the blue I had my HGV 1 licence.

If only everything was that simple. This tour turned out to be just as frustrating as the others I'd done with B Squadron. As always, we were completely reliant for results on the quality of information that we got and, as always, this was rarely reliable.

A huge amount of the tour was spent lying in hedgerows or derelict buildings watching terrorist suspects or their houses, trying to gather the pieces of information that would help to fill in the jigsaw puzzle and set up a big operation. If you haven't spent time in Ireland, the weather there can get pretty shitty at times and much of the time I would be freezing cold and piss-

wet through. I learned on this tour that Northern Ireland must have the most inquisitive cows in the world. Whenever we were patrolling in rural areas, they would follow us and if we were mounting an OP in a hedgerow, they would congregate around us to see what we were doing.

On one operation, we spent weeks mounting an OP on a house close to the border, carefully noting everything that happened there and waiting for the bad guys to show up, only for the penny to drop somewhere as we realised we had been sent to the wrong house.

On another occasion we were crashed out for a house assault in Andersonstown in Belfast. We had a quick briefing before we left and were told that the building was full of armed terrorists and we were to arrest them if possible. We moved out in six or seven operations vehicles, all dressed in civilian clothes but armed to the teeth. As we reached the Glenshane Pass we were probably doing in the region of 90 miles per hour in convoy in our rush to get there. The plan was for part of the team to form a cordon round the building and then for a group of six of us to smash our way in and make the arrests. As we screamed eastwards, the adrenaline was pumping round our bodies and I was mentally rehearsing how it should all pan out.

We managed to get there in one piece, Christ knows how, and the cordon was set up. The door was smashed down and we peeled off and in, looking for the terrorists. I heard shots being fired but I knew this would be the guys taking the locks off doors. I moved into one of the bedrooms and saw what appeared to be two little old ladies literally trying to climb up the walls. It turned out that I was right. They were the only occupants of the house and they were, indeed, two old ladies who were now somewhat the worse for wear with shock. *Shit.* The police arrived a few minutes later and after a quick on-site debrief, we headed back to Portadown at a more sedate pace. The reality was that for every successful operation we mounted, there were probably a hundred of these abortive fuck ups. I suppose the important thing was that we always tried to learn from them and never became complacent.

Back from Northern Ireland, I learned that I was being put on the VIP protection and bodyguarding instructors course. This was a big step forward for me because it effectively meant, if I did well, that I was likely to become one of the two close protection instructors working in the Regiment’s Counter Revolutionary Warfare Wing, and that would mean being detached from B Squadron for two years. It’s also a nod that you’re seen as being likely to move on to bigger and better things within the SAS. Of course, it

also meant that my employability outside the Regiment would be considerably improved too and that was no bad thing.

The content of the course was much the same as when I'd done the basic VIP protection and bodyguarding course a few years earlier but this time the focus was on delivering the content as training, so it was about instructional technique, designing safe shooting packages, realism and so on, together with knowing the subject matter inside and out. As always, I put everything into it and I was pleased to come away from the course with a top grade.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LATER YEARS

In 1985 I was duly posted from B Squadron to the Counter Revolutionary Warfare (CRW) Wing as chief instructor in the ‘protective security cell’. The changes in the Regiment which had started after the Iranian Embassy Siege were well advanced and there was a very different atmosphere in the SAS from what it had been like when I first joined. In some ways it was an improvement: we were certainly much better funded than we had been back in the 1970s and that could only lead to an improvement in capability. But at the same time there were other changes which, in my opinion, were for the worse.

I’ve mentioned before that junior officers in the SAS by and large left the day to day running of their troops to their troop staff sergeant – the good ones did at any rate. A lot of officers saw this as a bad thing but I’m really not so sure. An SAS troop commander is given command of his troop immediately after passing selection and continuation training when he has, literally, no experience of participating in Special Forces operations at all. In his troop, he will almost certainly have NCOs who have been with the Regiment for eight, ten or twelve years, and often longer. These aren’t the sort of dim-witted ‘grunts’ you see in crappy war films but men who have been selected for the SAS and then remained in it because they are intelligent, adaptable and capable.

On the face of it, it looks like an insane idea that a 25- or 26-year-old captain should be in command of such men, but actually the system usually worked out. The reason for this is the traditional SAS relationship between a young officer and the members of his troop, and particularly the troop staff sergeant.

Ideally, the new troop commander will join his troop realising that he is on a really steep learning curve and for the first weeks and months he needs to be in listening mode. In this way, he can learn from his NCOs what works and what doesn’t, as well as how to deal with soldiers who are often older and more experienced than he is. When this relationship is working well, his

staff sergeant and other NCOs will guide him and help him develop so that as his tour goes on, he can assume more and more responsibility. In this way, the troop commanders will eventually reach the position where they can make a real, positive difference to a troop.

On the other hand, if a young officer can't accept this – and some can't – then fundamentally he was demonstrating that despite having got through selection and continuation, he was not really suited to being an SAS officer and would probably be better off elsewhere, in the more traditional parts of the army. And if you think that I'm being patronising or dismissive of officers, I'm not. It was exactly the same for soldiers in the SAS: they were constantly being observed by the officers and senior ranks to see whether they were suitable and if not, off they went. That's how it had always worked: it was a system that wasn't broken and didn't need fixing.

The majority of the officers who commanded 8 Troop when I was there, men like Alastair McKenzie, David J and Tim Collins, were really great guys. I remember when Tim Collins came to us in the mid-1980s. He had exactly the right attitude: he was willing to listen and learn; he didn't mind getting his hands dirty in routine work on the vehicles and so on; and he had a good sense of humour. Once he'd learned the ropes – and he was a quick learner – we were more than happy to follow his lead.

But there were some in the SAS hierarchy who didn't like this at all. They took, if you like, a more 'traditional' view of the relationship between officers and NCOs and there was a feeling amongst some of these senior officers that the senior ranks in the SAS needed to be put back in their place. This was a discussion which had been going on in the Regiment since the 1970s, when DLB had been the commanding officer, but it came to a head in 1984, when Lieutenant Colonel M became commanding officer of 22 SAS.

Lieutenant Colonel M came in with a plan to make changes in the Regiment and one of these was the idea of cross-posting between squadrons. He took the view that if a soldier stayed in the same troop in the same squadron throughout his career he became too entrenched and promotion became a system of filling 'dead men's shoes'. Instead, when a vacancy came up for a senior NCO in, say G Squadron, it might get filled by someone from A Squadron.

To be fair, this is how much of the rest of the army operates, but the SAS is different. The nature of the work we do means that you have to have absolute trust and reliance on the men you're working with, and you only develop that

by working closely with them for long periods. If you're hopping from squadron to squadron the whole time this isn't going to happen. The careerists amongst the NCOs weren't too worried by this: they would do what it took to move themselves up the ladder. But for those of us who came through under the old system, it was a seriously unwelcome development.

By the time this happened I was a sergeant and I had high hopes of eventually being the 8 Troop staff sergeant. Unfortunately, that never happened. Just before my move to CRW Wing, a new troop commander had come in, a Para who was known to the lads as 'ET' because of his bulbous head, and I simply didn't see eye to eye with him. His report on me was just about enough to throw a spanner in the works and ensure that, no matter how hard I tried, I wasn't going to make it to the top of 8 Troop. The annoying thing was that he barely knew me, and vice versa. For most of the time he was in the troop, I was away with CRW Wing.

Even so, I wasn't exactly doing badly. As an instructor in CRW I was effectively earmarked as one of the small group of individuals who would be leading SAS training teams around the world. It was a high-profile role within the Regiment and I was pleased to have it.

First things first, though. In 1985 it occurred to me that it would be a good idea to organise a reunion to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the Embassy Siege. We had a bit of a discussion within the squadron and everyone was very enthusiastic, so I then spoke to the landlord of the Booth Hotel in Hereford, who was very pro-SAS, and he agreed we could use the Booth as a venue. Next step was to find a celebrity to front it and do the entertainment and so I approached Jim Davidson, whom I'd met when he'd visited the Regiment a few years before. Jim was very pro-military and used to do charity appearances all over the place, working particularly with BLESMA.* He was still a big name as a comedian back then and, to my delight, he agreed like a shot. I suggested to him that we dress him up in my black assault gear and he could then drop down from the balcony, whip the respirator off and start his act. I asked Snapper to rig a small distraction charge to kick this off and on the night it went really well. Only me and Snapper knew it was Jim Davidson and after the charge had gone off and he'd 'unmasked', it all went down a storm. Late in the evening, I remember Snapper standing on the bar and dropping his trousers to show off the scars on his backside where he had been caned in Hong Kong a few years before. From the look of his arse, it must have really fucking hurt!

* BLESMA = British Limbless Ex-Service Men's Association (now known as Blesma, The Limbless Veterans); the national charity that supports servicemen and women who have, in serving their country, lost the use of their limbs or eyesight.

My job in CRW was fairly straightforward. I was responsible for training selected members of the Regiment, along with police officers assigned to royalty protection duties, in bodyguarding techniques and drills, and for running live firing exercises for them. In addition to this, I was in charge of the supervision and management of the protective security cell; the design of bespoke training packages and courses in bodyguard techniques; and carrying out specific threat assessments and security surveys.

Courses for the Regiment really relied on squadron availability. A course of this type usually ran over a six-week period and would involve 12 students, normally all from the same squadron. The number twelve was chosen because it was manageable from an instructional point of view but it also fitted in with the techniques and drills that we taught. On low-profile tasks, you probably only need one bodyguard, one VIP and one vehicle; for an intermediate-level task, you might have two vehicles and a four-man team; but a high-level task would normally require a 'security advance party' with a vehicle, and then a lead car, VIP car and back-up car with the principal which is, all told, a 12-man protective detail.

In my day, a guy called Pete, a policeman, ran the royalty protection bodyguard courses in conjunction with me and Charlie Cooke in Hereford. For the police we did two different types of course: the first was refresher training for established members of royal protection teams; the second was a kind of selection process looking to identify police officers of the right standard to join royal protection teams in the future. The police guys used to love coming to Hereford because we gave them realistic training, which they never got back with their own forces. We could take them out to our training areas and put them through anti-ambush drills with live rounds, improvised explosive device (IED) awareness training, a high standard of first aid training and everything else they needed, all within realistic training scenarios.

One of the big frustrations for us and for the police was the weapons they were issued. They all carried five- or six-shot .38 Special revolvers which gave them nowhere near enough firepower in the event of a serious kidnap or assassination attempt. This had come about because of the attempted kidnapping of Princess Anne in the Mall in March 1974. Her bodyguard had

drawn his Walther PPK but it had jammed and he was unable to clear it before he was shot by the kidnapper. This led the police to decide to stick with revolvers which some think, wrongly in my view, are more reliable. We had been recommending for years that they adopt the 9mm Browning Hi Power but they never did in my time.

In 1986 my role in CRW Wing meant that I was to deploy out to Indonesia, with members of B Squadron, for a training task with the Indonesian Special Forces. To prepare me for this role, the powers that be decided that I would need to do a colloquial Malay course to help me to communicate with our students and, as with the Arabic course, this was to done in the education centre at Stirling Lines, so it was back to the books again.

The odd thing was that despite having an Education Corps Malay language instructor, the Regiment decided to bring in Wally the Spoon – whom I first met when he was hawking in the cookhouse while I was doing selection – to instruct us. Now Wally must have been 50-ish by then and was a veteran of Malaya and Borneo, and he could speak Malay at 'interpreter' level. He was a seriously fit man still but he was lacking in one key aspect: a sense of humour; and he was going to have to develop one pretty quickly if he was going to instruct B Squadron.

Wally lived out in the village of Credenhill, which was about six miles from camp, and he used to cycle in every morning to begin our lessons. There were more than a few occasions when we would be sitting in our classroom waiting for him to show up, only for the education officer to have to come in and fill in for him until he appeared.

This came to a head one morning when, once again, Wally wasn't there and the education officer had taken over. Suddenly the door flew open and Wally appeared, his schoolmasterly tweed jacket, skin-tight and complete with brown leather elbow patches, soaked in sweat and rain, covered in mud, tie over his shoulder and eyes wild. We all burst out with laughter and even more so when we found out what had happened. It seemed that Wally's bike had got a puncture shortly after he'd left home, so he picked it up and ran in with it: it hadn't occurred to him to go home and get his car, or phone the camp to tell someone. Wally was taken to one side for a quiet chat and the education officer finished the course for him.

We flew out to Jakarta for what was supposedly a secret training mission with the 'Komando Pasukan Khusus' – the Indonesian Special Forces

Commando. The weird thing was that there were still a few guys knocking around the Regiment who had fought against these guys in Borneo in the 1960s but, it appeared, nobody was holding any grudges and they were very welcoming. Their actual headquarters was at Cijantung, near Jakarta, but they had a ‘Special Warfare School’ at Batu Jajar on West Java. The actual training area we would use was in what is called ‘moon country’. It was typical South-East Asian jungle but, because it was all between 4,000 and 6,000 feet in altitude, it got really cold at night, to the extent that there was sometimes frost on the trees in the morning. Then, during the day, it would warm up rapidly and by mid-afternoon the temperature was exactly what you would expect in the jungle.

The plan on this occasion was to integrate B Squadron with the Indonesians and carry out a series of exercises so that they could learn from us, and it involved the usual range of skills: jungle patrolling; setting up ambushes; tracking; fire and movement; patrol medicine and lots and lots of jungle range work. Disappointingly, I didn’t get to speak much Malay as the Indonesians were very keen to practise their English and asked us to do all the training in the English language.

The Indonesian second-in-command asked me if I would help him to put on a snake demonstration with our guys and I was happy to help out. We went out into the jungle with some sacks and started looking for live snakes. This didn’t take long as the cold made them very docile, and within an hour and a half we had 30 or 40 of various types bagged up to take back to camp.

We headed back to the B Squadron base camp in the jungle and rousted the guys out of their bashas and into a clearing where the water bowser was parked. We told the lads to stand still and then tipped the snakes out onto the ground amongst them. Some of the snakes were still quiet and groggy from the cold, others were somewhat more fired up from having been lugged around in sacks and they took off in various different directions. Some of the snakes disappeared off into the jungle, some wriggled around between our feet. It was interesting to watch the reactions of the guys. Some clearly didn’t mind the snakes at all whilst others really had the wind up.

The idea of the demonstration was to build confidence amongst our guys who were generally not used to dealing with snakes. Nine times out of ten in the jungle, if you come across a snake it will bugger off in the opposite direction as fast as it can without you having to do anything about it at all. The only problem we had on this occasion was with a spitting cobra which

decided to slither into the water bowser trailer and wouldn't come out. The Indonesian snake expert eventually got pissed off with it, grabbed it by the tail and hauled it out, holding it up to show everyone that he'd got it. At this point it did what spitting cobras do and spat a load of venom which hit one of the guys on the shoulder. This was a close call: if the venom from the snake hits you in the eyes, it can cause blindness. For me, the upshot of this demo was that for the rest of the training, the Indonesians referred to me as 'Orang Ular' or 'Snake Man'.

My next team task, also with B Squadron, was to go to Nepal to train the Nepalese Special Forces. This was a small specialised team of about ten or twelve guys going to give the Nepalese some specific skills. My role was to train their counter-terrorist snipers.

Before we left Hereford we got the usual brief about what we would be doing, where we would be going and so on, but for some reason we were specifically warned to be on our best behaviour on this trip. I was old enough by now to have learned my lesson. The higher you get in rank, the more is expected of you, and as a sergeant I couldn't afford to fuck up at all. In fact, while I won't say that my riotous days were entirely behind me, I was 37 years old by now and you do tend to take your foot off the hooliganism pedal.

We flew out to Kathmandu in business class on a Boeing 747, scattered around the cabin so that we didn't look too much like what we were. It's a marathon flight, about ten hours if I remember rightly, and the opportunity to get extremely bored is always there but, as a good NCO, I settled down to watch the movies they were showing on the big screen at the front of the cabin, eat my airline food and not draw attention to myself.

The cabin was no more than half full and for some reason an idiot civilian decided that now was his opportunity to act the twat. This involved moving around the cabin, talking loudly, lying across two or three seats at once, sitting in front of people to block their view and generally being an arsehole. God knows why: maybe he needed the attention? At one point, while they were showing one of the movies, he came and sat in front of Scobie who was the team leader, deliberately blocking his view of the film. Scobie leaned forwards and said something; I'm not quite sure what it was but from the look on the guy's face he wasn't asking if he could be his special friend. After a couple more seconds, Scobie stood up and slapped him really hard across the back of the head, with a big, audible 'CRACK!' *Shit!* We hadn't even got to Nepal and already we had an incident brewing. Looking around, I

could see that most of the team had seen what happened. Not good!

The stewardess walked over to Scobie to find out what was wrong and, to my horror, I saw that the guy he'd hit was actually crying. Oh dear. But despite my fears, nothing happened. The duty idiot went back to his own seat and sulked for the rest of the flight and nothing more was said.

In Kathmandu the Nepalese government had put us up in a smart hotel and on the first evening we got together for a couple of quiet beers. Someone mentioned that there was a casino in the hotel, the only one in the country apparently, so a few of us decided to head down there for a quick flutter. It was a slightly odd place, supposedly built to accommodate Indian gamblers who couldn't, at that time, gamble in their own country.

Trouble was now looming. In the casino, drinks were free if you were gambling and this was a red rag to a bull for some of the team. One of the lads got somewhat the worse for wear and was sent to the casino's sin bin where no alcohol was allowed until he'd calmed down and, of course, those of us who were still drinking managed to continue taunting him for the rest of the night. For some reason, my luck was in and I won an absolute fortune. For me the evening finished in a suite being used by a Lufthansa crew who were overnighting. They invited me back for a few drinks and I eventually stumbled back to my own room in the early hours.

The next day we met up with the Nepalese Special Forces and they turned out to be a great bunch. Small in stature but with hearts as big as lions'.

The first stage of the training was, as usual, working on individual skills. I had a group of eight snipers to train and for this we went off to a bog-standard 600-metre range with the standard L42 sniper rifle we used back then. The L42 was a good weapon: it was basically a Lee-Enfield actioned rifle in 7.62mm calibre with a scope attached and it did the job, though it's nowhere near as good as some of the sniper rifles available these days.

I started off with the theory of using a sniper rifle. This puzzled some of the Nepalis who assumed that you just put the aiming post on the target and fired, but fortunately the officer in charge of them spoke good English and was on my wavelength. We worked through how the vertical and horizontal scope adjustment worked – and why you had to do it – and they soon got the message that it wasn't quite as straightforward as they'd thought, particularly in windy conditions.

With the theory explained, we moved on to shooting. Once I got my weapon zeroed, I wanted to demonstrate what we expected from them. I'm a

good shot, though I say so myself, and I thought that if I showed them what I could achieve, it would encourage them. I set up two standard ‘Figure 11’ targets and then moved back to the 300-metre point where I fired five rounds. We then moved back to the 600-metre point and I fired a further five rounds. Then we moved back down to inspect my targets. *Phew*. I’d managed a two-inch group in the 300-metre target and a five-inch group at 600 metres. I couldn’t have shot better even if I’d wanted to.

Now it was their turn. They fired hundreds of rounds a day over the next week, in all kinds of different weather conditions, and by the end of it, most were managing consistent six- to seven-inch groups at 600 metres. Only one guy failed. He simply didn’t have the technique and, after a long discussion with the Nepalese officer, we took him off the course.

The next part of the training was due to take place at a location high in the mountains above Kathmandu and the plan was to march there to give us all a bit of a workout. Unfortunately I never made it. On the way up, Johnnie ‘Two-Combs’ Howard got appendicitis and, as the team medic, I spent the rest of the deployment looking after him, as I’ve already described.* I didn’t begrudge this. If I hadn’t been there, he wouldn’t have made it. He got his nickname because of his vanity: there was never a hair out of place and his uniform and clothes were always immaculate, but it’s fair to say he was looking pretty rough throughout this period and I think he was pleased that there was only me there to see him.

* See Chapter 7.

Having finished my time in the CRW Wing, I returned to the familiar environment of 8 Troop. Our boss now was a Parachute Regiment officer called Major S who was a real contrast with ET. When I rejoined the troop he took me to one side for a chat and told me that ET had briefed him that I was a problem character but that he had been keeping his eye on me as a result and couldn’t see what he was on about. Major S was a no-nonsense guy in the best traditions of the SAS and had been a platoon commander in 3 Para in the Falklands. I liked him because he was trustworthy and reliable. In later years, like ET, he became a senior general in the army but, unlike ET, I felt that this guy deserved it.

It was still all go. Having returned to B Squadron, we were sent off on a team task to work with the President of Nigeria’s personal bodyguard. Ibrahim Babangida had become President of Nigeria after launching a

military coup in 1985 with the supposed intent of ending human rights abuses and ushering in a civilian government. In consequence, Margaret Thatcher's government had sent an SAS training team out to train his bodyguards so that he could finish this task. By 1987, when we were due to go, the patience of the British government was wearing thin. Babangida hadn't made much effort to institute reforms and there were serious rumours of yet another coup attempt in the offing. Our mission was effectively a last chance. We would be going to train bodyguard instructors – using the best of the bodyguards we'd previously trained – so that they would have no further need to rely on British help: effectively, they could sink or swim.

We flew out to Lagos and were promptly taken for a briefing at the British High Commission on what we could and couldn't do. We had an officer with us – I don't remember who it was – but his role as usual was to be a kind of figurehead and liaison officer between us, the High Commission and the Nigerian government. The real leader was Tommy, with me as, in effect, the training advisor. Having spent two years in the CRW Wing training bodyguards, I was by far the most experienced bodyguard trainer out there and I was in a position to know if we were getting it right.

Almost the first thing that happened when we got there was that we were each issued a 9mm Browning Hi Power as a personal protection weapon, together with a weapon permit signed by the President himself. Lagos was, and is, a seriously dodgy place and we didn't need any mishaps on what was a very low-profile mission.

It turned out to be quite complicated working with the Nigerians. Tribalism seemed to dominate everything and all of our students were striving to be the top dog but, on the other hand, their shooting skills were excellent, they were very physically fit and their willingness to learn was a joy to behold.

Not all of them stayed the course, because there's a difference between learning to be a good bodyguard and learning to train bodyguards but I came away from the process with the strong impression that, after six weeks of training, this group of Nigerians were the best and probably the keenest group of students I had instructed throughout my time in the SAS.

We finished the course with the inevitable party and this involved an arm-wrestling competition, where 'Smudge' and I took on all comers and beat them. All in all, it was a good time.

Still, we nearly came to grief on the drive back to Lagos the next day. The weather was horrendous, with torrential rain, thunder and lightning. On the

way into town, two of our vehicles smashed into a huge cow which had wandered out into the road in almost zero visibility and it took some time to disentangle its corpse from the vehicles; but we did finally make it. The final act of the course was meeting General Babangida himself, who presented us with a plaque to thank us for our efforts. There were no gold Rolexes on this occasion;* from his reputation, he'd probably flogged them all on the black market.

* An SAS training team which I wasn't involved with got into severe difficulties with the Inland Revenue after a foreign Head of State presented every member with a Rolex at the end of their task. Fortunately – or sadly maybe – that never happened to me.

Back in Hereford, I discovered from the Officer Commanding B Squadron, that I was being sent on the 'brigade and regimental intelligence cadre' (BRIC) course which was held down at the School of Service Intelligence at Ashford in Kent. This was a really weird course to be sent on. It was basically aimed at corporals who were being posted to work in their battalion or regimental intelligence cells and lieutenants and captains who were being made regimental intelligence officers or brigade G2 officers. Essentially it was all about learning really basic Soviet tactics, together with Soviet and Warsaw Pact vehicle recognition. Now the Cold War was still on, and the Berlin Wall was intact, but Gorbachev was in power in Russia and the threat was rapidly diminishing. I couldn't see what benefit either I – as now a staff sergeant – or the Regiment was going to get from it but 'Ours not to reason why' and all, so I signed out a box of motivation tablets from the quartermaster's store and went.

It turned out to be as shit as I'd imagined. Everyone else there was keen and well motivated because for them it was an upwards move, but for me it was sideways at best. Much of it was a slow death by viewfoil and slide projector, with a deadly dull Intelligence Corps warrant officer, with a whiny voice, droning through the recognition features of BRDMs, T-74s, BTRs, BMPs,* Mig jets and all the other equipment used by the Russians and the Warsaw Pact. Every morning we were tested to ensure that we had learned the stuff we were supposed to have assimilated the day before and that was yet more slides of little bits of Russian vehicles. Death would have been a welcome release.

* Soviet armoured vehicles of the Cold War era, some of which are still in use in Russia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

The BRIC was followed by the Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Warfare (NBC) instructors course which was more practical and more to my taste. For part of it we lived in NBC gear in a bunker, simulating what would happen if a nuclear weapon had been used, calculating how the atomic cloud would move under different wind and weather conditions. It was interesting enough but I still couldn't see why I had been sent on it. A previous victim had been the Mink. He'd been away when the course came up and, unable to defend himself, we'd volunteered him for it. It didn't do him or the Regiment any good either. It was made even more ludicrous by the fact that by then the Intelligence Corps was spreading all over the Regiment like a noxious green mould.

Since I had finished with the CRW Wing, I'd been told time and again by the powers that be that I would soon be promoted to warrant officer class 2 before I ended my 22 years' regular service, and this was due in 1990. For reasons that nobody could explain to me, this never happened. By now, Gonzo was the squadron sergeant major and an officer called Ian had taken over as squadron commander, but I remained as a staff sergeant as squadron operations manager, which struck me as odd. I had broad experience across the board in SAS operations, I'd done well enough on every course I was sent on and I had never significantly fucked up; but that last promotion remained tantalisingly out of reach. Nobody could question my commitment to the Regiment; nobody could question my ability, which I'd proved time and again; and my disciplinary record, formal and informal, was better than many. So why was I stuck as a staff sergeant?

I discovered one reason for this in conversation with some of the lads over a few beers one evening. I must have had a few drinks and was moaning about not being promoted.

'Rusty, mate, you aren't in the Lodge. They aren't going to promote you; why would they?'

'What are you talking about?'

'Freemasons. If you're not a Mason, you're going to struggle to move up.'

This had never occurred to me. I knew a few of the senior ranks were involved with Freemasonry, but I had never realised how important it was.

'Look at the last few boards. The Masons look after their own; that's how it works.'

Freemasonry had never been on my radar. I'd been asked if I was interested in joining a few times but I'd thought it was just one more thing to have to worry about and had always turned them down. Now it seemed I'd fucked up. It was subtle but it was there. If there were two candidates for a promotion of more or less equal ability, you could be sure that the Freemason would get it. One of the reasons I'd stayed with the SAS for so long was because I thought it was a strict meritocracy. You travelled as far as your ability took you. It turned out that wasn't really true and, to be honest, I was rather disgusted.

But there was another reason too. My adoptive father, John Arthur Russell Firmin, had been living and working in Saudi Arabia as a shipping import and export manager and for a number of years I'd had very little contact with him. It wasn't because I didn't like him, simply that we were on different continents doing different things. In 1989 we went out to Australia and New Zealand to train with their SAS units. The training went fine, but at one stage I was summoned to the officer commanding's office for a security interview.

These were usually routine: everyone in the SAS is security vetted as a matter of course because a lot of what we do is highly classified. But this interview was a little different. The questions kept on coming back to what contact I had with my father; how often we spoke and exchanged letters; what contacts I had with other members of my family.

This was all very mysterious and I decided to do some digging. What I uncovered really surprised me quite a lot. Dad was not only working in Saudi but he had also converted to Islam, and a fundamentalist version at that. In fact my father was now going by the name Mohammed Hassan Abdullah and this had led to me being put on a watch list. Everything fell into place.

In the normal course of events, my time in the army would have come to an end in February 1990 with my 22 years of adult service completed, but I wasn't such a disaster that the Regiment wanted to get rid of me just like that. Instead I was offered two years of continuance to serve as a squadron quartermaster sergeant with 23 SAS in Kingstanding in Birmingham. This would raise my pension and also, according to the adjutant of 22 SAS, allow them to promote me in due course to warrant officer class 2. I thought about it for a while. I'd never had much to do with the Territorial Army and I suspected it was going to be dull, but I also thought that I could use it as a prolonged, paid period of resettlement, and that was an attractive prospect. I said yes.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SWAN SONG

So at the grand old age of 40, with 22 years of adult service in the regular army behind me, I was now off to serve with the TA for the first time. To be completely honest, I knew relatively little about it other than second-hand gossip from other guys within the Regiment who had served with it. From time to time, the powers that be in the SAS had tried to make it a condition of promotion above sergeant that we should spend some time as a permanent staff instructor (PSI) with one of 21 SAS who were based around London and the south of England, 23 SAS who were in Birmingham and up north into Leeds, Newcastle and Scotland, and the Honourable Artillery Company who were right in the City of London. In reality, most of us made a big effort to dodge this particular bullet and it wasn't difficult to understand why. Almost all of us had joined the Regiment because we wanted the kind of full-on operational experience that you could only get with the regular SAS.

Back then, members of the TA, including TA SAS, simply didn't get to serve on operations at all, unless they volunteered to actually join the regular army for a set period. They certainly didn't get mobilised. That all changed after the Gulf War and the wars in the Balkans in the 1990s but in the spring of 1990, when I was sent to 23 SAS, that was all in the future. The TA had, for years, been basically a drinking club in uniform. 21 and 23 SAS formed what was called the 'Corps Patrol Unit' which was designed to penetrate behind the Russian lines in the event of an all-out war in Europe. Then they would dig in, creating a combination of observation post and bunker, from which they would watch and report on Soviet movements on main supply routes using the Mark 1 eyeball and whatever sensors and viewing aids they could carry. Fair enough, this would have been an important job if there had been a war, but many of us didn't understand why the unit that did it needed to be an 'SAS' unit, with all the connotations that had. They were trained in a tiny fraction of the techniques that we used routinely and there was simply no comparison between us. It seemed to me that a halfway decent infantry unit – even a TA one – would be able to handle the same role that these two units of

TA ‘SAS’ had.

Which is not to say that the people were all crap: they weren’t, but they weren’t SAS in the same sense that we were. A good example is Chris Ryan, who became famous for his feat of endurance during the great Bravo Two Zero cock-up. He came to B Squadron from 23 SAS but he had to do the whole of selection and continuation training from scratch, and then serve for a while in a regular Para battalion, before they let him loose in 22 SAS. He was a good bloke, fit, intelligent and conscientious, but he needed a lot of training to bring him up to 22 SAS standard. He definitely had what it takes and he went about joining the Regiment in the right way. From my perspective, he was one of the few guys in 7 Troop who wasn’t afraid to get his hands dirty.

So I knew from speaking to a few of our lads who had worked with the TA SAS, and from the members of the TA that I’d run into along the way, that being with 23 SAS in Birmingham wasn’t exactly going to be a thrill ride. I’d taken the job because it would give me two extra years of pension contributions and because I saw it as a reasonable way to ease my transition into the civilian world, giving me the chance to get a few useful courses under my belt before I left.

Before I left 22 SAS, I was given the traditional ‘dining out’ by the sergeants’ mess, along with a few others who were leaving at more or less the same time. It was a great evening which actually lasted well into the early hours of the morning and, along with the traditional farewells, there was also the traditional settling of old scores too. At some point, after considerable quantities of alcohol had been consumed, I found myself having a punch-up in the sergeants’ mess toilets with a guy called Dave, from A Squadron and also a grade A wanker who had been a student on one of my bodyguarding courses and had been damned sure he knew more about it than I did. We’d both had so much to drink that we didn’t do any real damage but I’m happy to say that the few spots of blood which were spattered around didn’t come from me. It was odd really; by and large I got on with most of the guys from other squadrons I came into contact with, but never with him.

I walked home afterwards and, as far as I was concerned, that was the end of my career with 22 SAS. I had the weekend off to shake off the hangover and then it was off to Birmingham.

On Monday morning I was picked up by a couple of the other 23 SAS PSIs, one of whom was my old mate Bobby C, and we headed off to the 23

SAS headquarters in Kingstanding, Birmingham. This was only 64 miles from my house but took the best part of two hours through the country roads and then battling through the city traffic. When I got there, the whole place exuded a laid-back atmosphere. For most of the week, the only people present were the permanent staff and the cleaners. My job was to be the squadron quartermaster sergeant PSI in HQ Squadron, which meant overseeing all the weapons, kit and equipment on issue to members of the squadron, as well as the other squadron stores, vehicles and all the rest of it. This wasn't a difficult job at all, just a boring one, and I was lucky in that my TA counterpart, Mac, was well on top of it all and didn't need much more than an occasional look over my shoulder to make sure it was going OK.

The other permanent staff in Birmingham included Trevor W, an ex-G Squadron guy with a broad Yorkshire accent, who was sergeant major PSI in the squadron, 'Slaphead', who was regimental sergeant major, and Major Mick H and WO2 Don W, who were quartermaster and regimental quartermaster sergeant respectively. As it happens, Major C, who had left the regular army a few years before, was the commanding officer.

The idea was that we were supposed to live locally, paying rent with a 'lodging allowance' that was given to all of us, so that we would be around if any 'fast-balls' turned up but it was made clear to me right from the word go that nothing ever happened and that almost all the other PSIs were living in their own homes around Hereford and commuting in, paying their petrol money out of the lodging allowance and taking the rest as a perk of the job. That didn't seem a bad idea at all. If I needed to be in Birmingham overnight, when we were preparing for an exercise or something of the sort, I could doss down in the stores in a sleeping bag. Nobody minded.

HQ Squadron wasn't one of the 'sabre squadrons' but the home of people like the storemen, the cooks, the medics, the operations-intelligence team and other assorted REMFs* and it had about 120 men under command. They were a mixed bag of people. Some were good, committed members of the unit, some were out-and-out Walter Mittys and some just seemed to be along for a bit of a jolly.

* Rear Echelon Motherfuckers.

For most of the week, Kingstanding was quiet as the grave but on Tuesday afternoon and evening it became a hive of activity as it filled with TA soldiers taking their weekly opportunity to dress as an SAS soldier and 'live

the dream' for a couple of hours. This sounds like I'm being cynical and unfair, and I probably am, but it struck me as faintly ridiculous that this group of people who, at that time, were barred from going on operations, had this amount of fuss lavished on them. Nevertheless, I knuckled down and got on with helping the TA squadron quartermaster sergeant to ensure that everything was properly prepared: equipment readied; meals booked; ammunition delivered and so on. Some of them were good guys. The TA squadron sergeant major lived in Hereford and was a good mate, as well as being the captain of the HQ Squadron drinking team.

Working closely with the TA squadron quartermaster sergeant, who by general agreement of the regulars and TA was one of the sharpest guys there, I soon discovered that he was a big noise in the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) and he subsequently helped me gain several qualifications which would help in my transition to civilian life. The great thing about him was that, provided I did my share of the preparation work during the week, he was completely competent to cover any problems during weekend training, which meant I didn't usually have to turn to at the weekends as well as during the week. He was genuinely the most impressive TA soldier I worked with.

The weekend training varied. Sometimes they would go off to the ranges for some shooting; or they might go parachuting to stay 'in date' with their qualifications; and then there was the seemingly endless process of TA SAS selection which, because it was done in instalments, dragged on for more than a year. Fortunately, with the TA squadron quatermaster sergeant in place, I rarely had to chase the weekend warriors around.

Within a month of arriving at Kingstanding I was thoroughly bored and wondering whether I would be able to stick it. This was compounded when, in August 1990, the Gulf War broke out. I knew very quickly that 22 SAS would be involved and I desperately wanted to go with them. I thought: *Fuck my luck!* I immediately called the adjutant at Hereford to volunteer. I was 40 years old and still very fit, and obviously I had a wealth of SAS experience. The answer was bitterly disappointing: if I was called back to the Regiment, they would just have to find someone to replace me and SAS NCOs of my level of experience don't grow on trees, so no dice. The ridiculous thing was that you don't need to be an experienced SAS NCO to be squadron quartermaster sergeant of an SAS squadron, and particularly a TA one: you need to be good at logistics. It's like insisting that an airline pilot should be

chief steward: sure he could do it, but why would you want him to?

In fact it later emerged that General de la Billière had banned all SAS NCOs over the age of 40 from deploying to the Gulf. DLB wasn't as popular within the Regiment as he's often been portrayed: a lot of the guys joked that 'DLB' actually stood for 'Dirty Lying Bastard'. One of the reasons for his unpopularity was his habit of making arbitrary rulings like this. The reality is that fiascos like 'Bravo Two Zero' could have been prevented if there had been some more experienced operators around to have an input into the planning and leadership of the operations.

Let's look at that for a moment. Bravo Two Zero got into trouble because once they were compromised and were unable to make contact with base, they had no means to get themselves out of trouble other than on foot. The result was that three good men died and most of the rest were subjected to a violent ordeal in an Iraqi prison. The fact is that if they'd taken vehicles with them, they could have moved quickly to a position where their communications actually worked and organised an evacuation, but they didn't because they didn't have the experienced people present to insist that that was how to do it. You can argue all you like about the practicality of taking vehicles behind enemy lines but the fact of the matter is that the SAS have been successfully concealing vehicles in the desert since 1942. It's part of what we do, particularly in the Mobility Troops, and the Regiment actually did it in numbers during the Gulf War itself. As far as I remember, none of the Bravo Two Zero patrol had served in Mobility Troop and if any had, it wasn't for very long, but this kind of infiltration was our speciality. The reality was that it was a big time fuck up.

I was personally devastated that I couldn't get out to the Gulf to fight alongside my squadron and others were too. A squadron warrant officer actually got out to the Gulf before accidentally bumping into DLB and finding himself sent home. You'd have thought that the daft old bugger would have better things to worry about than the fact that an SAS warrant officer was a few months over the arbitrary age limit he'd set. Even so, a few 'over 40s' did get out there on operations and did well. It wasn't like a Saga Holiday.

Rather than wallowing in disappointment, I decided to get on with my primary purpose in going to 23 SAS which was to get myself set up for the transition to civilian life. I was planning to move onto the security circuit, but the TA squadron quatermaster sergeant, with his RoSPa hat on, suggested

that I should get myself a few qualifications which would help to enhance my CV.

The first course I was able to get on was a forklift instructors qualification run by the army, which would give me a five-year licence to train forklift drivers, and I also booked myself onto a diploma course in ‘health and safety at work’ and a couple of other minor related courses. The bad news, as I realised, was that these would be deeply dull, but on the plus side the army would pay for the courses and give me a subsistence allowance as part of my resettlement package.

Then, completely out of the blue, Yorkie, the adjutant at 22 SAS, gave me a call. Would I be interested in moving to the Honourable Artillery Company to be their SAS PSI?

This was interesting. The HAC wasn’t formally part of Special Forces but its role in those days was very similar to that of 21 and 23 SAS: operating stay-behind observation posts to call in strikes against targets behind enemy lines. Consequently, they had several SAS PSIs as part of their set-up. As an ex-Gunner I was interested enough. Two points held me back: firstly, one of the senior SAS guys there was a guy who had the nickname ‘Wendy’. I didn’t get on with him at all: I don’t know any other SAS guys with a woman’s name for a nickname, for a start. In any case, I had a strong suspicion that I was going to be the guy making everything work, and he was going to be sitting behind his desk, taking the credit. Secondly, I had all my resettlement courses booked: would I have a guarantee that I could take up my place on the courses? I wasn’t sure about this; Yorkie was the same character who’d once told me, a couple of weeks before we both started selection when he and I were both corporals, that the SAS needed him for the regimental rugby team. Did I really trust him? I don’t think so.

There was some to-ing and fro-ing over several telephone calls but eventually the answer came that they would do what they could, but there was no guarantee. I decided to say no. This didn’t please Yorkie at all. He suddenly got his adjutant’s head on and began to tell me that they would have to reconsider my promotion to warrant officer class 2. Blackmail doesn’t work with me, and actually his threats made my choice easier. Some poor sucker from D Squadron ended up with that particular poisoned chalice.

So there was no move to the HAC, which was a shame, as it is undeniably a great place to make contacts through its close links with the City of London. Instead I decided to crack on with 23 SAS. The boredom was

threatening to kill me so I decided to invent some jobs for myself.

Instead of hanging around in Birmingham dying of tedium, I decided to take myself off on trips to the various 23 SAS outstations in Prudhoe outside Newcastle, Dundee and Leeds, where I could get on with moving kit and equipment around for training and exercises. Of course, this also gave me the opportunity to go for a few beers and a chinwag with my friends who were working as PSIs in these locations, all paid for by the army which was happy to pay me subsistence as I went round the country doing stuff that in the regular army would be done by private soldiers and junior NCOs at best. I also did some foreign weapons training for the TA, which gave me another excuse to travel around the country.

On one occasion I was at the 21 SAS base at the Duke of York's headquarters on the King's Road in Chelsea where I'd gone to meet up with Tommy, an Irishman who had been cross-posted from D Squadron to B in 22 SAS, and had eventually wound up with 21 SAS and was one of the PSIs there. After we'd taken care of business, our plan was to have a beer and a chat in the bar. Tommy happened to be the orderly officer that day, so it was part of his job to make sure everything was closed down and locked up for the night. After Tommy had done his rounds that evening, we were walking across to the bar when we heard a noise which seemed to be coming from the sergeants' mess, which Tommy had already closed down and locked up.

This was odd, to say the least, so we went back to the sergeants' mess, which was upstairs in the main 21 SAS building. The door was still locked and secured, so maybe we'd imagined it? Then there was another noise from inside. There was definitely someone there, so Tommy banged on the door. I suppose we imagined it might be burglars or something of the sort, although I guessed only the most deranged burglar would try to rob an SAS barracks while there were still people around.

But no, it wasn't burglars. After a short interlude, the door was unlocked from the inside and a head poked round. It was an NCO from 21 SAS.

'I locked this bar up. What the fuck is going on?' Tommy asked, reasonably enough in my view.

'Oh, don't worry, it's just a meeting of the Rosemary Lodge. The Poison Dwarf said we could use the sergeants' mess.'

Both of us knew the Poison Dwarf all too well. He'd been squadron sergeant major at B Squadron not long after I'd joined, was still a commissioned officer in the Regiment – training major at 21 SAS – and not

somebody you wanted to get on the wrong side of. Tommy, as orderly officer, was effectively powerless, so we left them to it, baring their breasts at each other or whatever it is that Freemasons get up to.

We wandered back to the bar and chewed over what had happened. As I mentioned before, I'd had little notion of just how many Freemasons were in the SAS (or is it vice versa?) until my promotion prospects had begun to stumble when I reached the rank of sergeant. Before then, along with my mates like Snapper, if I'd given any thoughts to the Freemasons in the Regiment it had only been to take the piss out of them, but I had begun to realise how all-pervasive and influential they were.

I certainly knew of one incident where a B Squadron senior NCO had been driving home after drinking at a mess function and had run a woman over. His 'punishment', for want of a better word, had been to get a promotion and a posting to Germany until the fuss had died down. As I began to realise, the role of the Freemasons in the SAS was to look after their own and in some ways they did it very effectively. There was one occasion, I was told, when a promotion board within 21 SAS had been so stitched up by the Masons that it nearly provoked a mutiny, in part because some of the people who were promoted had been virtually invisible in the regiment for months if not years; there was certainly no merit involved.

I believed at the time – and still do – that my failure to join the Freemasons, in combination with the fact that my dad had converted to fundamentalist Islam and had married an Eritrean woman, despite having a sick wife – Dorothy – back home in the UK, had seriously got in the way of my career prospects

Another thing that pissed me off about my new life was how petty it all turned out to be. When I was in 8 Troop, the things that kept you awake all night were worrying about whether you would make it through the next day; it might have been dying in a hail of gunfire on a god-forsaken airstrip on Tierra del Fuego or having an unfortunate encounter with a hippopotamus somewhere on the Okavango Delta. In 23 SAS, the only thing likely to kill us was the flood of paperwork.

Any time a new directive came in from the powers that be, Slaphead, the regimental sergeant major, would churn out reams of paperwork to greet it and get his requisite slap on the back. Rainforests were destroyed in the process. There came a time when Slaphead decided, for reasons best known to himself, that he would get a grip on the PSIs at Kingstanding and

elsewhere over lodging allowances. As I explained, this was money that was given to us so that we could be sure that we were within easy reach of the headquarters if we were needed. The reality was that we were never really needed on such an urgent basis that we had to live within a few miles of the barracks, so we took the cash and got on with our lives.

Slaphead had noticed that there was a caravan parked within the barracks and, one morning, when we were both in work early, he came to my office and told me:

'Rusty, find out who owns that caravan and tell them to report to me as soon as possible.'

'Yes, Sir!' I responded.

'I want to know if any fucker is sleeping in it. There'll be hell to pay if there is.'

I had to go to the loo to stop laughing. Slaphead was so buried in his paperwork he didn't have a clue what was going on around the unit. In truth I knew exactly who owned it: Mick H, the quartermaster, who had been a warrant officer class 1 in 22 SAS and wasn't about to be intimidated by any regimental sergeant major. Of course he was sleeping in it. Like the rest of us, he knew that 23 SAS wasn't going to be called out to any embassy sieges in the immediate future.

Not long afterwards I saw Mick the quartermaster walking into the drill hall with a towel over his shoulder, evidently off to the shower after another night in the caravan.

'Sir,' I told him, 'the RSM wants to see you about the caravan; he wants to know who owns it. I think it's to do with sleeping in the barracks while claiming lodging allowance.'

Mick rolled his eyes. 'Tell the RSM that the caravan is mine and if he wants to talk about it, he should come to my office.'

I was on a trouble-making roll by now and thought: *Why not?*

I headed over to the regimental sergeant major's office and knocked. I heard him call me in and entered.

'What is it, Rusty?' he asked wearily.

'You asked about the caravan,' I told him, 'it belongs to the QM and he wants to see you now.'

Slaphead realised that he'd fucked up but there was nothing he could do about it. He walked across the drill hall and knocked on the quartermaster's door and I watched him go in. I couldn't resist following him and listening

outside. Mostly it was muffled by the door but eventually I did hear, loud and clear: ‘Mind your own fucking business! You get on with being RSM and I’ll get on with being the QM, got that?’

I scuttled out of sight sharpish as Slaphead left. Oddly the subject of lodging allowance didn’t come up again.

One of the things that bothered me at Kingstanding was the amount of kit we signed out to the TA which never got returned. There was literally thousands of pounds worth of, mostly, clothing, webbing, sleeping bags, rucksacks and other bits and pieces which had been issued to TA soldiers who then seemed to have vanished into thin air, and I decided to do something about this. I put together a file of issue and receipt vouchers all signed by the missing weekend warriors, and then went round to their last known addresses and waited for them. When someone turned up, I would introduce myself, show them their signed chit and asked for the kit back. Mostly they were co-operative and dug it out of their cupboards and garages and gave it to me. For those that had moved on, I tracked them down to their forwarding addresses and went through the same routine. This proved quite cost effective and we were able to bring back into use a lot of kit that would otherwise have been written off. I even got a big pat on the back from the squadron commander and the quartermaster but sadly no MBE: the citation must have got lost in the post.

Another problem was with a kit car which had been left in the barracks by a soldier who’d left. It was an Eagle fibreglass body on some chassis with huge alloy wheels and fat tyres: a real boy-racer special – but untaxed and uninsured – and the head shed were getting antsy that it was just sitting there. I phoned the guy who owned it and told him it had to be moved but he told me he had nowhere to put it and he couldn’t drive it because of the lack of MOT, insurance and tax. After a bit of discussion, I offered him £80 for it which he accepted. I got it loaded on to a three-ton truck which was taking some stuff over to Hereford and took it back to my home where, after a few hours’ work on it, I was able to sell it for £800.

The two years at Kingstanding were an absolute bore and, by the end, I wished I’d never taken the job. This may look like a jack attitude on my part but the reality was that I hadn’t joined the Regiment to do this kind of thing and I was the wrong guy to send there. The positives were that I got to see my family a lot more than I would have done had I still been with 22 SAS and I got to do my resettlement courses but I suspect I would have been better

off not trying to jam those in in the midst of work I wasn't enjoying. There was an exciting world outside the army which I was just about to get stuck into, and I'd been putting it off.

At the end of my two years at Kingstanding, I was dined out of the sergeants' mess of 23 SAS and handed over my job to the next poor sucker – Lew, also ex-B Squadron. A few days later I went to Stirling Lines to be completely de-kitted. As I handed over my ID card to the chief clerk in the orderly room, it occurred to me that for the first time since I was 15, I was a civilian. I walked out of the gates without any great handshakes or farewells. I knew I would be seeing the people I liked anyway. So that was that. A total of 24 years in the army, 15 in the SAS, and time to do something different.

What happened next? That's another story.

PLATES

Me (left) with my family in Carlisle in the late 1950s.

Me (right) with George Creighton and his air rifle, about 1963.

Me, third from the left, with 143 Battery, 49 Field Regiment, Belfast, 1973.

All-Arms Commando Course, Lympstone (me, back row, second from left).

FOOTBALL

BAOR Six-a-Side

Bertie Vogts, West German Footballer of the Year presents the Rothmans Trophy to *Gunner Firmin* after 49 Fd Regt had won the BAOR six-a-side football finals held at Rheindahlen in May. Eighty-four teams competed.
This competition was well worth winning as Rothmans were subsequently kind enough to fly the whole team back to UK and provided tickets for them to watch the England match against West Germany at Wembley.
This marked the end of an outstanding season for 49 Fd Regt whose football, rugby and hockey sides all reached the last eight of their respective six/seven-a-side BAOR competitions and whose full sides have won no fewer than nine major trophies over the last four

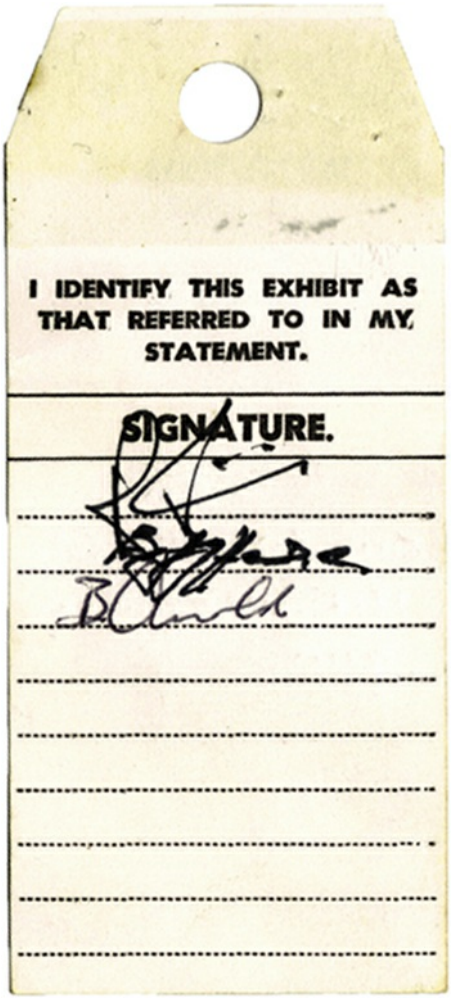
Receiving the Rothmans six-a-side trophy from Bertie Vogts, 1974.

SAS jungle training, Belize 1977 (me on the right).

8 Troop exercise, Wainwright, Canada.

Patrolling the Belizean border (me on the right).

Sim Harris gingerly makes his way across to the balcony of the adjoining building during the siege on the Iranian Embassy, 5 May 1980. (Photo by Keystone/Hulton Archive/ Getty Images)



Evidence tag for the MP5 that I used to shoot Faisal.

The last two members of the four-man, front balcony assault team, about to enter the building to clear the first floor. (STF/AFP/Getty Images)

8 Troop, jungle training (me, third from left).

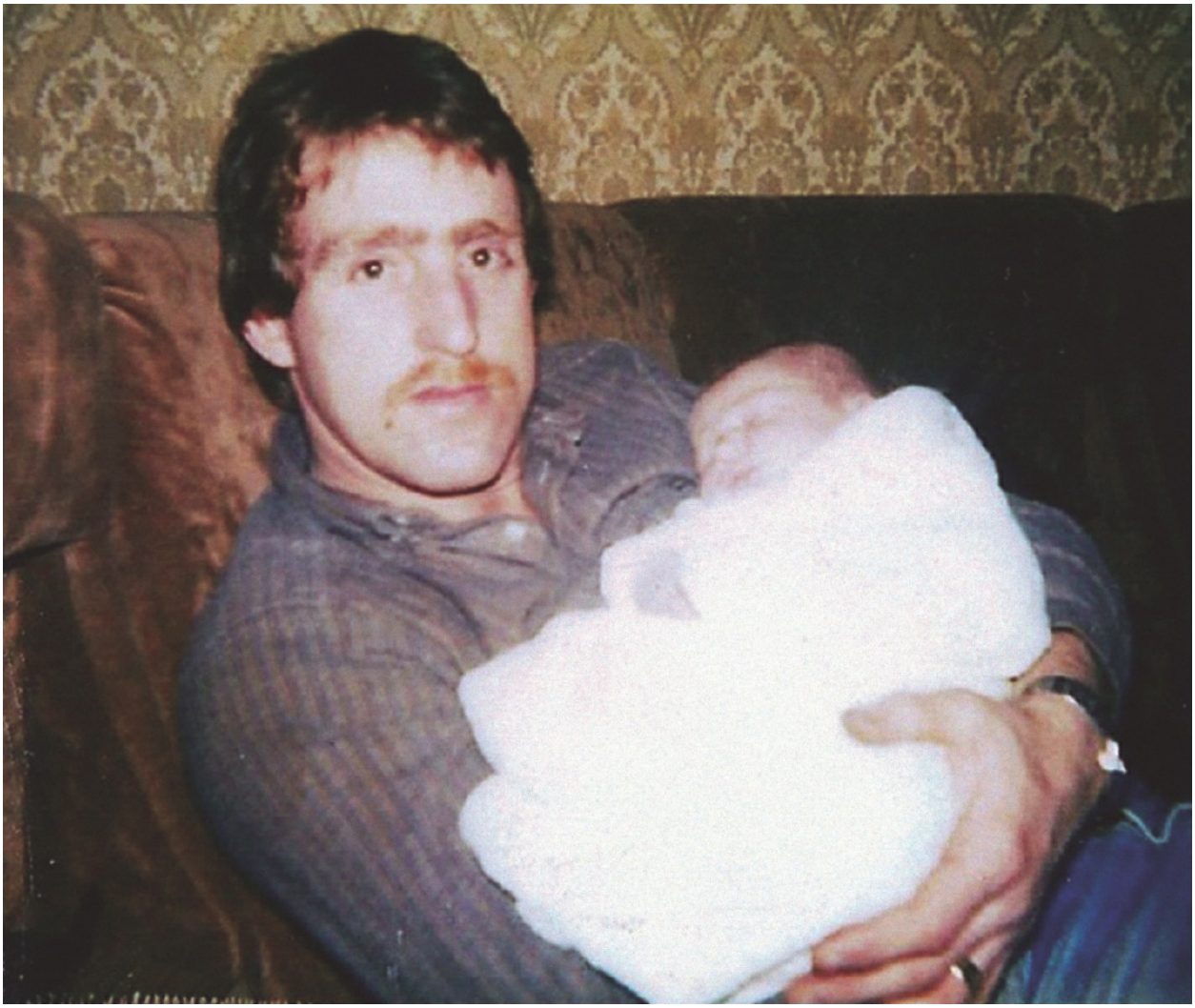
8 Troop and Baluchis of the Sultan's Armed Forces, Oman 1981.

Me with comedian Jim Davidson at the opening of the new Stirling Lines barracks in Hereford.

B Squadron on board RFA Fort Austin, South Atlantic, June 1982.

Me with a Pucara at Port Stanley Airfield, June 1982.

Surrendered Argentinian weapons at Port Stanley, June 1982.



Me with baby son Mark, 1982.

B Squadron preparing for a water jump, Cyprus, 1983.

Botswana, mid-1980s. Me posing next to my basha and Can-Am motorcycle during our training exercise.

Snake demonstration, Indonesia.

Johnny Mac, Snapper and me, Northern Ireland, mid-1980s.

Me with Mark, mid-1980s.

Me firing a GPMG while in Oman on training exercises, 1980s.

Me in No. 2 dress uniform outside the old officers' mess, Hereford.

Training Nepalese Special Forces, 1987.

Me with the Nepali doctor before John Howard became ill and had to be evacuated by helicopter.

WE ARE THE PILGRIMS. MASTER: WE SHALL GO
ALWAYS A LITTLE FURTHER: IT MAY BE
BEYOND THAT LAST BLUE MOUNTAIN BARR'D WITH SNOW.
ACROSS THAT ANGRY OR THAT GLIMMERING SEA.

The Memorial Clock at Hereford: if your name isn't on here, you've 'beaten the clock'. The inscription is a line of verse by the poet James Elroy Flecker.

Left: Mohammed Hassan Abdulla, formerly John Arthur Russell Firmin – my dad. Picture taken in 1985. Right: My son Matthew, 1992.

My German Shepherd, Sabre.

Me nowadays: older, wiser and still with all my own hair!

ABREVIATIONS AND GLOSSARY

ABBREVIATIONS

A & E	Accident and Emergency
APC	Airport Camp
BAOR	British Army on the Rhine
BFT	basic fitness test
BRIC	brigade and regimental intelligence cadre
CQB	close quarter battle
CRW	Counter Revolutionary Warfare [Wing]
CT	Counter Terrorist [Team]
CTR	close target reconnaissance
Det, the	14 Intelligence Company
DS	directing staff (a term for instructors)
DZ	drop zone
E & E	Escape and evasion
FAC	forward air control
GPMG	general purpose machine gun
HLS	helicopter landing site
IA	immediate action
IRA	Irish Republican Army
MRS	medical reporting station
NAAFI	Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCO	non-commissioned officer
OP	observation post
PIRA	Provisional Irish Republican Army
PSI	permanent staff instructor
PT	physical training
QTO	qualified testing officer
R & R	rest and recreation

RAF	Royal Air Force
RAOC	Royal Army Ordnance Corps
RCGP	Royal College of General Practitioners
RE	Royal Engineers
REME	Royal Electrical Mechanical Engineers
RHA	Royal Horse Artillery
RoSPA	Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents
RPB	Regent's Park Barracks
RTU	return to unit
RUC	Royal Ulster Constabulary
RV	rendezvous point / to rendezvous
SAS	Special Air Service
SBS	Special Boat Service
SLR	self-loading rifle
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
TA	Territorial Army
ZANLA	Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army
ZIPRA	Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army

Glossary

casevac	casualty evacuation
crap-hats	soldiers who aren't serving in airborne units (also known as 'hats')
head shed	squadron command group
Para	Parachute (as in 16 Para Brigade)
pinkies	Specially converted long-wheelbase Landrovers used by the SAS as patrol vehicles

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rusty Firmin was adopted as a baby and brought up in Carlisle as the son of an Army NCO and his wife. He had a turbulent childhood and was often in trouble until he joined the Army as a ‘Junior Leader’ aged 15. He served for ten years in the Royal Artillery before volunteering for the SAS and passing selection on his first attempt. As a junior and relatively inexperienced SAS NCO he was surprised to be given command of one of the two assault teams at the Iranian Embassy siege in 1980, and was personally responsible for killing Faisal, the second in command of the terrorist cell, during the dramatic final assault.

After 15 years’ service in the SAS, during which he served all around the world, he left the Army to join the ‘circuit’ of private security contractors. He has recently been signed as technical advisor for a feature film about the SAS, and is the co-author, with Will Pearson, of *Go! Go! Go! The Story of the Iranian Embassy Siege*.

A fitness fanatic and keen sportsman throughout his life, as a member of the Army football team in the early 1970s he was asked to consider joining Arsenal as a professional footballer. He now lives with his wife in an idyllic village on Dartmoor.

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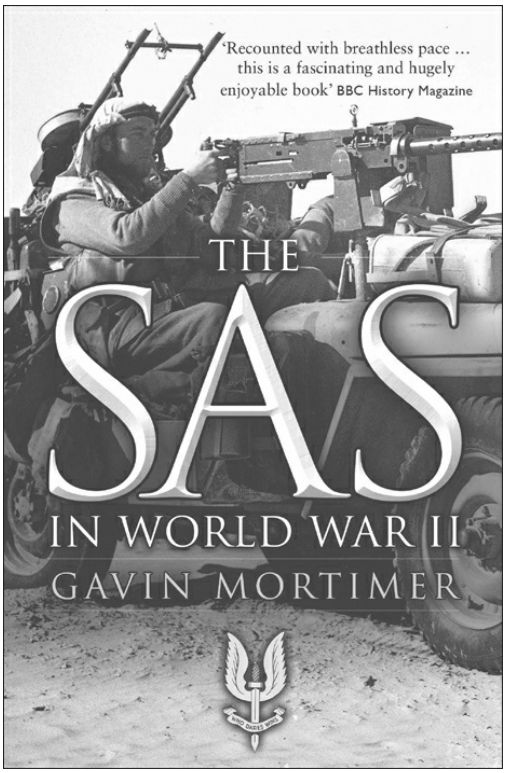
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The SBS in World War II
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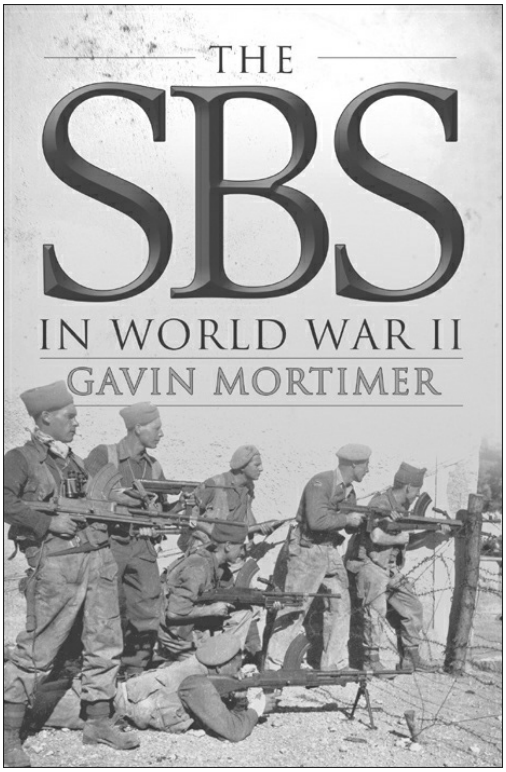

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Through unrivalled access to the SBS archives and interviews with surviving veterans, and incorporating additional new text and photographs in this updated paperback edition, Gavin Mortimer pieces together the SBS's dramatic exploits, finally granting the unit and its members the recognition

they so richly deserve.

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Front cover: Studio shot of SAS veterans, including Rusty at the centre, for a drama programme based on the Iranian Embassy Siege. (Photo by John Rogers/Getty Images)

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